2020

Transference Vol. 8, Fall 2020

Molly Lynde-Recchia
Western Michigan University, molly.recchia@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference

Part of the Classical Literature and Philology Commons, Comparative Literature Commons, East Asian Languages and Societies Commons, European Languages and Societies Commons, French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons, German Language and Literature Commons, International and Area Studies Commons, Language Interpretation and Translation Commons, Linguistics Commons, Modern Languages Commons, Modern Literature Commons, Near Eastern Languages and Societies Commons, Poetry Commons, and the Reading and Language Commons

Recommended Citation
Lynde-Recchia, Molly (2020) "Transference Vol. 8, Fall 2020," Transference: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 1. Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol8/iss1/1
Transference features poetry translated from Arabic, Chinese, French, Old French, German, Classical Greek, Latin, and Japanese into English as well as short commentaries on the process and art of translation. Selection is made by double-blind review. For submission guidelines, visit us online at:

scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference

ISSN (print): 973-2325-5072
ISSN (online): 2325-5099
© Transference 2020

Cover: “Reflections” by Paul Robbert

Globe image © Don Hammond/Design Pics/Corbis

We gratefully acknowledge support from Emily Brooks Rowe and from the College of Arts and Sciences at Western Michigan University. We would also like to express our appreciation to Rosamond Robbert and to Thomas Krol.

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

This issue was printed by McNaughton and Gunn using Georgia, Segoe Script, MS Mincho, SimSun, and Gabriola fonts.
Editor-in-Chief
Molly Lynde-Recchia

Editorial Board

Jeffrey Angles           Peter Blickle
Vincent Desroches       Olivia Gabor-Peirce
Rand Johnson            David Kutzko
Mustafa Mughazy         Carlos Pimentel
Viviane Ruellot         Cynthia Running-Johnson
Rika Saito              Vivan Steemers
Xiaojun Wang            Li Xiang
Shu Yang
Contents

Foreword vii

Andrew Gudgel
The Zhongyuan Festival at West Lake by Zhang Dai 1
[excerpt]
Two Poems by Tan Yuanchun:
When I First See My Whiskers Have One Gray Hair, 2
I Cry Out in Surprise
All the White Hairs Pulled from My Mustache Came Back 2

Allan Johnston
Guillemette Johnston
My Dear Double (Part I) by Abdellatif Laâbi 6

James Fowler
From the Villa by Lucretius 28

Susan McLean
Four Poems by Rainer Maria Rilke:
The Blind Man 32
The Donor 32
The Arrival 33
Lady on a Balcony 34

John Savoie
Persistence of Memory after a poem by Bashō 36

Marilya Veteto Reese
Six Poems by Safiye Can:
Alas 38
Latitude 38
Housemate Shopping 39
Eternal Trial 39
Gratefully Acknowledged 40
Disclaimer 40
Emily Goedde
Four Sonnets by Feng Zhi:
Sonnet 6 43
Sonnet 12 44
Sonnet 16 45
Sonnet 18 46

Susanna Lang
Two Poems by Nohad Salameh:
I Greet You, My Twin 50
Dance of the One / the Moon 51

Paul Shlichta
Crystal by Martha Hofmann 57

Arnold Johnston
Two Poems by Charles Baudelaire:
The Lovely Ship 59
Invitation to the Voyage 61

Louise Stoehr
Five Poems by Michael Krüger:
Berlin in February 64
Hotel Maritim proArte, Friedrichstrasse, Berlin 64
Berlin-Charlottenburg 65
Hotel V, Knesebeckstrasse, Berlin 66
Berlin-Nikolassee 67

David Capps
Corona by Paul Celan 74

Patrick Williamson
While dreaming, while writing (excerpt) by Max Alhau 78

Mike Baynham
Drops from Black Candles by Abdallah Zrika 83
Wally Swist
*Lullaby* by Rainer Maria Rilke 113
*Amen* by Georg Trakl 113

Eric E. Hyett & Spencer Thurlow
Four Poems by Toshiko Hirata:
*Is It February?* 117
*Is It March?* 119
*Is It November Again?* 121
*Is It December Again?* 123

Sharon Fish Mooney
*On Tasso in Prison* by Charles Baudelaire 128

Michael Zhai
*What Are You, Really?* 132
*Afar, Gazing at the Holy Mountain* by Du Fu 137

Notes on Contributors 139
Foreword

“The artist in each one of us potentially ‘awakens’ elusive thoughts and ideas beyond the pale of day-to-day awareness.”
—Paul Robbert

“[T]here’s nothing to see, except those who have come to watch the festival.”
—“The Zhongyuan Festival at West Lake” by Zhang Dai, translated by Andrew Gudgel

It seems appropriate to start out this special issue on vision/seeing with the quote from artist Paul Robbert and the first line from Gudgel’s translation of Zhang Dai, with its insistence on the fact that it isn’t the festival itself but the show provided by those who come to watch it that creates the real spectacle. The idea of vision/seeing as a special theme for this year’s issue was inspired by the simple pun on the year 2020, as in 20/20 vision.

We invited a wider variety of contributions for this issue, including poems in English that take their point of departure from a work in the source language rather than directly translating it (such as James Fowler’s “At the Villa” and John Savoie’s “Persistence of Memory”). This issue also includes two lengthier essays, which, in a fortuitous coincidence, both discuss work by the poet Abdellatif Laâbi to different degrees: Mike Baynham’s essay on agencement includes a discussion of the impact of Laâbi’s French translation of Abdallah Zrika on his own English Zrika translation, and Allan and Guillemette Johnston analyze the complex notion of the double in the essay accompanying their translation of part I of Laâbi’s “My Dear Double.” Another fortuitous coincidence is the presence of translations of three Baudelaire poems: two by Arnold Johnston (including “Invitation au voyage,” which Baynham mentions in his essay) and a third by Sharon Fish Mooney. (As an aside, and as we close this pandemic year, it is interesting to be reminded of Baudelaire’s revolutionary notion that one can make a beautiful poem about an object that is inherently repulsive.)

The thematic of vision/seeing is explicitly addressed in some of the poems and commentary included here. For exam-
ple, Susan McLean observes that “Rilke uses the outward details of the appearance of things to unlock their emotional resonances.” Marilya Veteto Reese’s opening translation of Safiye Can’s “Alas” begins, “In the far distance / beneath the starry skies / we both were free / in different countries and cities / the firmament / a bond for both.” In her discussion of Feng Zhi’s sonnets, Emily Goedde asks “How does a frame help us see?” and points out that “[t]ranslation ... shifts between frames.” Mooney presents ekphrasis as “a type of translation, transposing the ‘language’ of the visual arts into the written language of poetry” and sees her English translation as “another ekphrastic layer.” And Michael Zhai presents us with two visuals—the Chinese characters of Du Fu’s original poem and an image of the mountain they describe—inviting us to create our own vision and rendering of the source poem before offering his own.

It goes without saying that every act of translation can be implicitly understood as another way of seeing the original poem. In the wider sense, is not every physical act of seeing an act of translating the real into our consciousness? The creative self then “awakens’ elusive thoughts and ideas,” bringing into being what was previously unperceived. We hope you will enjoy this kaleidoscopic collection of poems and reflections, and that it will stimulate further creative excursions.

It will come as no surprise that due to the pandemic, putting this year’s issue together was a bit more complicated than in the past. One of the results of the pandemic, it seems to me, has been the frequent reminder to practice gratitude whenever possible. I will take that cue to offer my appreciation and thanks to all of the contributors, peer reviewers, colleagues and supporters who make Transference possible, with special thanks to Scholarworks librarian Maira Bundza, recently retired from Western Michigan University, and to our typographer Thomas Krol. I am deeply grateful for your creative contributions, your expertise, your patience, and your support for this shared poetic enterprise.

Molly Lynde-Recchia, Editor-in-Chief
The Zhongyuan Festival at West Lake

[The night of] the Zhongyuan Festival at [Hangzhou's] West Lake, there’s nothing to see, except those who have come to watch the festival. Of those who come to watch the festival, you can see five kinds of people.

One kind that can be seen are those with multi-decked ships full of flutes and drums, who wear their official hats and host grand banquets, have blazing lanterns, singing girls and servants. The sights and sounds dazzle, and they are famous for watching the moon—but never actually see it.

Another kind that can be seen also have ships with decks, famous beauties, illustrious daughters from good families, and equally handsome young boys. They laugh or cry out at random, sit in circles on the flat roof [of the boat] and glance left and right. Their bodies are under the moon but they don’t really watch the moon.

Yet another kind that can be seen have ships, music and singing, famous courtesans and idle monks. They sip wine while humming tunes and there is soft music which mixes flutes and voice. They are also under the moon and watch the moon, but they want others to see them watching the moon.

One kind that can be seen have no boat or cart, no coat or hat. They’re tipsy and full of food and shout together in herds and knots. They push their way into other groups of people, clamor and raise a din at Zhaoqing Temple and the Short Bridge. They pretend that they’re really drunk and sing tuneless songs. They watch the moon, watch those watching the moon, watch those not watching the moon, but actually see nothing.

Finally, there can be seen those with small ships and light curtains, with clean tables and small stoves. Their tea warmers clank as they seethe and plain porcelain cups are quietly handed around. They bring good friends and beautiful women and invite the moon to sit together with them. They either hide under the shadows of trees [by the bank] or leave the hubbub of the lake altogether. They watch the moon and don’t care if anyone sees them watching the moon, nor do they “watch the moon” on purpose.
When I First See My Whiskers Have One    Tan Yuanchun
Gray Hair, I Cry Out in Surprise 始見鬚有一莖白嗟異之

So many gray hairs I didn’t notice,
Yet I’m surprised when I see this one.
I begin to worry that I’ve passed my prime
And at first, try to keep the old woman from knowing.
When I glance in the mirror my spirit wavers a little;
When I pluck it out, my reflection wavers a bit more.
Suddenly, I have the urge to become a hermit—
You won’t be able to have fun for long.

All the White Hairs Pulled from
My Mustache Came Back  前所拔白髭復生

Tweezing them out takes all my strength;
Their growing back makes me change my mind.
I don’t wish I was younger—
The snow and frost are already deep.
My feelings begin to change at midnight:
Decline comes from seeking old roads.
I feel there’s someone else in the mirror,
Which day by day reflects the passage of time.
Zhang Dai (1597–after 1680) was born Shanyin (now Shaoxing) in China’s Zhejiang Province, and is considered one of the premier essayists of the late Ming/early Qing Dynasty. Though never an official himself, he was born into a family with a history of imperial service. Zhang lost his house, fortune, and possessions when the Ming Dynasty fell. He was fifty. He spent several decades hiding on a nearby mountain before returning to rent a portion of what had been his ancestral home. Zhang was a master of an essay style known as Xiaopinwen (小品文 lit. “little pieces”); short, vignette-like essays which, rather than stating a theme, often use images and word-play to evoke a mood in the reader. His most well-known work is *The Dream Recollections of Tao An*, a collection of essays about his life before the fall of the Ming, from which this translation is taken.

*The Zhongyuan Festival at West Lake* demonstrates Zhang Dai’s skill in using both the Xiaopin form and the Chinese language, which posed several challenges for the translator. One was that in order to be concise, Zhang assumes a lot of knowledge on the part of the reader. Hangzhou’s West Lake, with its islands, lakeside paths and bridges, would be a well-known location for scholar-officials all over China—even if they had never visited it. In a similar vein, Zhang assumes the reader knows that the Zhongyuan festival (held on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month) revolves around watching the full moon. As a result, I had to balance between parenthetical explanation and simply naming locations and events that might be unfamiliar to an audience half a world away and three-hundred-plus years later.

Perhaps the toughest challenge in translating this piece was Zhang Dai’s repeated use of the word kàn (看). It makes up approximately ten percent of the entire excerpt, and depending on the context is used to mean “see, watch, look at, observe.” Classical Chinese does have separate words which convey each of these meanings, yet Zhang has for the most part ignored them and instead hits the reader with the cumulative force of repeating one word. I did the best I could to re-create the effect in the translated text.
Zhang also appears to use subtle wordplay at one point to slip two meanings into a single word. The character (鐺) has two different pronunciations with two entirely different meanings. When pronounced “chēng” it means “wine/water warmer.” When pronounced “dāng” it means “to clank.” So the phrase 茶鐺旋煮 could be read as something akin to “tea (warmer/clanks) rolling boil.”

Tan Yuanchun (1586–1637) was born towards the end of the Ming Dynasty in Jingling (now Tianmen) in China’s Hubei Province. A scholar-official, he was one of the co-founders of the Jingling School, which rejected using the formal style, structure and diction of ancient writings as a model, and which instead emphasized creativity, emotion and expressing the writer’s personality. He died at the age of 51, as he traveled to Beijing to sit for the national-level examination.

When I first read these two poems, I was struck by the unique subject matter and the mixed tone of amusement and distress. In the first poem, even though Tan already has gray hairs (presumably on his head), the appearance of one white hair in his beard makes him feel past his prime. He then tries to hide both the hair and the “fact” of being past his prime from the “old woman.” The characters used here are (老母)—literally “old mother”—a term which could be used both for one’s mother and as an honorific to any older woman. It may be an ironic allusion to his wife. The use of “you” in the last line seems to be Tan reminding the reader that time and age will affect them as well.

The second poem acts as a sequel to the first. Time cannot be stopped or turned back, and plucked hairs always return. The poem is filled with images of midnight and winter and old roads. Tan says that he doesn’t want to be younger, yet he still feels the person in the mirror is someone else.

The last two lines of this poem were the most difficult to translate because of the multiple layers of meaning contained within the characters and phrases. The second-to-last line contains two words that I felt had been used in a doubled way similar to Zhang Dai’s “warmer/clank.” Mirrors in China used to be made of bronze, which in Chinese is 青銅, literally “green copper.” However, the word “green” can also mean “young.” As a result, I felt the line 感他青鏡裏 could be read simultaneously as “feel another in [the bronze] mirror” or “feel another young
[person] in mirror.” I decided to go with the first reading and omit the word implying bronze, since mirrors are now more commonly made of glass.

The last line was similarly difficult. Tan states “day by day” in a way which might be an allusion to the line “Make yourself anew each day” in the Confucian classic “The Great Learning.” In addition, the term translated as “passage of time” (光陰) can mean “life” as well as time. Finally, the characters themselves literally mean “light and shadow”—something that could indeed be reflected in a mirror.

Source texts:


My double
an old acquaintance
whom I visit with moderation
He is a shameless one
who plays on my timidity
and knows how to take advantage
of my distractions
He is the shadow
that follows or precedes me
aping my gait
He sneaks into my dreams
and fluently speaks
the language of my demons
Despite our great intimacy
he remains a stranger to me
I neither hate nor love him
for after all
he is my double
the proof by default
of my existence

Sometimes
I find him sitting in my place
and don’t dare ask him
to get up
I recognize him by the particular odor
of my finger joints
when I am not well
His carnal inconsistence
troubles me
and I’m a little jealous of it
Since there is only one seat
in my bedroom
I stay standing
I imagine that he works for me
in his own way
He paints on the light
to show me
how I should go about it
with words
and if I decide to open my mouth
he suddenly disappears

When I look at the sea
ignoring the waves
he turns his back to me
— in a manner of speaking—
It seems like he is listening
to the sound of a secret clock
marking off the part
of time allotted to death
When I raise my eyes
from the sea
to the swelling peak
he persists in seeing nothing
but the abyss
He spoils my fun
with his pretentions
to lucidity

As soon
as I discover a country
he surveys another one
and sends me derogatory messages
What amazes me
leaves him stone cold
The language I introduce myself to
does not have the caliber
of the one he sputters
The national dish
I’m about to savor
without preconception
always lacks the spice
or the creaminess he adores
and in the beauty
that bowls me over in passing
he inevitably seeks and finds
the hidden defect
That’s why for some time
I have limited
my voyages

He whispers to me
that he’s holding back
the word I have
on the tip of my tongue
for my own good
If I have become a real master
of hindsight
to whom do I owe it
If I walk with purpose
who decides?
Ah I strongly doubt
my solitude
when I talk to myself
It may be
that it’s only when I kiss
that I completely feel
myself
At the turn of a phrase
of a strophe
I stumble upon words
it would never cross my mind
to use
on hackneyed images
reminiscences of the stone age
of thought
I get alarmed
The artisan I am
suspects some talent
for snake-like deceit
I’m not ready to swallow
I thus deal
with a forewarned bird-catcher
a cultivated censor
a fine craftsman of doublespeak
“Know thyself,” the wise one asserted
Certainly
but things being what they are
I would like to add:
Beware of that self

He claims to be Argentinian
while I have a hard time
considering myself French
You would die more Moroccan than he is
while I revel
in my savage freedom
of statelessness
He argues
in favor of cremation
and me I am far
from having solved
the riddle of where
to be buried
He tries to enroll
in tango classes
without respect
for my fully screwed up
spinal column
To say the least
he exhausts me

Take risks
Make an effort?
It’s not his cup of tea
For me it’s the roller coaster
the pass of Thermopylae
Charybdis and Scylla
the Augean stables
the torment of Tantalus
the throes
of the Iraqi quagmire
the Gaza powder-keg
and the voyages Sinbad
has not dared to tell
I am the overflow
of his fears
the factotum
of his grand ideas
And the worst
is that I put up with it
without flinching

I would have liked
at my venerable age
to quietly cultivate my garden
caress the leaves of my bamboo
and polish them one by one
play the bee to my roses
and gather my fill of nectar
bury my arms in the earth
and patiently wait until they grow back
as two magnolias
and thus stretch out my branches
to collect the dew of the firmament
shelter the migratory birds
or children
who would have read and appreciated
The Baron in the Trees
No
it's no good
when I hear the snickering
of the one who persists
in planting around me
a hedge
of deforming mirrors

One day
inspired by Abraham's story
on official assignment
I get ready to slit the intruder's throat
hoping
it goes without saying
for divine intervention
in the form of a ram
or lacking that
a turkey
Seeing nothing coming
and getting desperate
I resolve
to turn the weapon on myself
What weapon?
I only see between my fingers
an ordinary Bic pen
and am enraged to discover
it has dried up

I also sometimes happen to reason
to myself saying:
Let us accept this division of tasks
One lookout is not enough
there should be two, ten, a thousand
And then
what is the external voice
without the inner one
weighing carefully
each thing and its opposite
listening to
the most distant memory
the labyrinth’s familiar
guiding us thus
toward accuracy of expression
and comprehensive vision
placing on our tongue
oh so rarely
the melting seed of reconciliation
with ourselves

Without warning
he disappears for a long time
to the point that I start
to doubt
his existence
Like a troubled soul
I feel less useful
than an onion skin
Aridity overcomes me
My inner voice
is only a gurgle
and my being
is reduced to a gut
So
I spread myself on my bed
and close my eyes
cursing poets
and poetry

Is he the despot
or is it me
The empire we are fighting over
is it worth it
Does it truly exist
or is it only a mirage
formed by the vapors of drunkenness
and the chilled steam
of compassion
Is it a haven
Or a trap door?
Poor him
poor me
who play hopscotch
with the bigger kids
pretending to forget
that the guardians of prosperity
also shoot at the old
even if they still
have children’s eyes

Have I invented him
for the sake of the cause?
I assure you no
I can still distinguish
a white thread
from a black thread
the breathing of stone
from the hot breath of living spirit
I am rarely wrong
about the origin of fragrances
the density of air
the nature of prints
left in the sand
on the skin
or the retina
Don’t worry
I have not yet crossed
the fine line

There are blessed days
when I take a break from him
Whether or not he is there
I manage to expel him
from my protective bubble
What happiness!
My pains
give me a respite
the leech of questions
releases its pressure
the Grim Reaper
passes by
without shooting me down with a look
the infinite becomes habitable
and the house of the soul
vast enough to welcome the procession
of my helpless visitors
Master of my own time
I no longer run after harmony
I feel that I was there before her
But he or she returns
Affirming this
May I dare ask
Is he, is she really the same
What do I know about it?
I try in vain to detect the essence of these multiple manifestations and content myself with capturing the subliminal and moreover often trivial message:
Stop smoking
Do something about your OCD
Be careful not to spill on yourself when you eat
Stop watching TV
Decide to buy the complete works of Paganini
Don’t look for a black cat in a dark room especially if the cat doesn’t exist

With him I lose my sense of humor which it seems makes my friends glad To lambast stupidity his stupidity as well and all the hellish days is only given to an elect few However and herein lies my pride I think that my candidacy
has not been usurped
I discovered this propensity
at a late time
and deplore to see it reduced
to the suitable share
because of the shadow of a possible
fantasy that crossed my mind
So what is to be done?
as Comrade Lenin said

Cultivate my uniqueness?
That’s not my style
Consult?
Out of the question
Hunt down my lookalikes
ensnare them like a slave merchant
and lock them in a cargo hold?
No
I don’t have that aggressiveness
Write little poems
about flowers and butterflies
or other very white and plump poems
that glorify the vanity of language?
That doesn’t do much for me
when the horns of the bull
gore my hands
and the beast’s breath
is burning my face
I might as well shout out to my double
while shaking the *muleta* in front of him:
*Toro*
come here and get it!
Commentary

The theme of the double is as old as literature itself—witness the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. More recent fictive examples include Joseph Conrad’s “Secret Sharer” and Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. But the interactions with the double illuminated in Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi’s “My Dear Double” complicate any simple arrangement of lawgiver vs. outlaw, man vs. beast, or good vs. evil. In fact the description of the double as “dear” illuminates this ambiguous relationship. Laâbi’s double is a figure defined in part by the (perhaps clichéd) cultural concepts of multiculturalism or postcolonialism, and his writing also bears the mark of the problematic concept of Francophone literature in addition to his coming to terms with his personal political history and the ever-soliciting presence of the endless remaking and remapping of history through ancient and contemporary political turmoils.

Laâbi explored his relation to francophonie in a comment describing speakers/writers of a language different from their native or birth language in a 2001 interview. Answering the question “Francophone is ... a political term. What about other terms that get used to further reduce and define Francophone poets as either being ‘inspired’ or ‘politically engaged’?” Laâbi said,

The question ... has to do with all the writers who do not write in their mother-, or, as I prefer to call it, birth-language. Take Indo-Pakistani writers—for example, Salman Rushdie, Ondaatje, etc. In England, the writers who are currently moving literature forward are not necessarily native to England—they are people who come from outside. In France we have the example of Kundera, who decided to write in French. This is a huge phenomenon in the world today. Apart from literature that we’d call “national,” there is a new kind of literature which is currently emerging in what I would call the peripheries of the world—India, Africa, or elsewhere. What is interesting here is that these literatures are straddling between two cultures, two imaginations, and two differ-
ent languages. But these writers are not only “between”—they have mastered both sides. I am perfectly bi-lingual: my birth-language is Arabic, my writing language is French. Perhaps what makes what I write unique is that the two cultures are intertwined. Even when I am writing in French, my Arabic language is there. There is a musi-calality in Arabic, and these words enter into my French texts. I think that people are not seeing the originality of this phenomenon which is currently world wide.¹

This sense of doubling is amplified as an overall concern in Mohammed Belmaïzi’s study “Introduction à la poétique d’Abdellatif Laâbi”:

Laâbi has forged a twofold textual type of writing, where orality has a preponderant role. In Laâbi’s work, the written French, for which the Latin alphabet is used, is molded through orality. That means that each French word, said out loud, is going to create another word that provides the sonorous image of the Arabic language. Thus, there are two overlapping texts: a written one and an oral one; whatever is said in French will be heard in Arabic. It is the projection of orality onto graphical symbols and vice versa that either makes for confronted or reconciled meanings. As a result, this strategy concerns not only the words, but ends up mixing and doubling the text at all levels: characters, places, and situations, to the extent where it becomes legitimate to consider Laâbi’s poetry and fiction as fantastic literature.²

The emphasis on orality led us to work on retaining Laâbi’s discursive, speaking voice in our translation. For the most part “My Dear Double” eschews punctuation, indicating transitions

between thoughts through capitalization and stanza breaks. We keep this feature to reflect the apparently casual style Laâbi brings to his work. This conversational tone, which lets one imagine (for instance) sitting with Laâbi in a coffee house talking about someone else, best serves the sense of orality that emerges in the work, as for instance when we first hear about the double:

Despite our great intimacy  
he remains a stranger to me  
I neither hate nor love him  
for after all  
he is my double  
the proof by default  
of my existence

Laâbi’s *il me reste étranger*, “he remains a stranger to me,” could be read “he is unknown to me” or “he remains foreign,” echoing in the latter the theme of cultural distance and/or duality implied in the concept of *francophonie*. Yet Laâbi’s own assertion of the intimate relationship he senses between Arabic and French led us, while still retaining the unavoidable universal and political flavor that is traced through history and then through literature, to move beyond a polarized, politicized reading to one addressing the psycho-spiritual complications he experiences with his double. The idea is one of uprootedness and confusion, of not knowing exactly where one belongs. Studying the interventions of his double, Laâbi recognizes the power of this inner presence that participates in the progression of the text borne out of a melting-pot of cultures, a presence that manifests itself in the pluralistic, ever-changing mosaic stemming from the psyche that surreptitiously weaves the text to which it surrenders.

A constant contrast recurs between a simpler world and a more intellectualized, critical one, conveyed for example in the “showing/telling” contrast Laâbi brings up in describing the act of writing:

He [the double] paints on the light to show me
how I should go about it
with words
and if I decide to open my mouth
he suddenly disappears

The ambiguity in *Il peint sur la lumière*, “He paints on the light,” lies on one hand in the possibility that the double is representing light, the way an Impressionist might by creating form and shadow in a painting, to show how to achieve an artistic effect that Laâbi then tries to capture in words (which when articulated orally—“if I decide to open my mouth,” *si je m’avise d’ouvrir la bouche*—fail him: “suddenly he disappears,” *aussitôt il disparaît*). But another reading might introduce darkness, concealment, diversion, or deflection, perhaps censorship, as the light is painted over. In either way the quality of doubling points back to a characterization Laâbi makes of his background, suggesting the dual cultural influences informing his work:

> I was born in a country that was colonised by the French. In school we did not learn Arabic because we were taught in French. So when I began to write, the only language that I really knew was French.... I was born into an illiterate environment. My parents were never able to express themselves. One of the reasons I started to write was for the men and women who are not able to express themselves, but who are not stupid nonetheless ... to allow them to speak, to have something to say.\(^3\)

Capturing that duality of experience, that sense of an oral Arabic culture within a literate Francophone one that is then translated into English, suggests the issues surrounding—and hopefully somewhat overcome—in rendering Laâbi’s report on his interactions with this mysterious and elusive double that puts between him and his writing *une haie / de miroirs déformants*, “a hedge / of deforming [or distorting, or deflecting] mirrors,” in a process of inversion, multiplication, and crossings over of altered cultures and meanings presented in kaleidoscopic style.

\(^3\) Interview with Abdellatif Laâbi by Kristin Prevallet.
About this translation

Given that Archipelago Press has just released *In Praise of Defeat*, an extensive bi-lingual volume of Laâbi’s works translated into English by Donald Nicholson-Smith\(^4\) that includes this poem, one could ask why another translation should be necessary. A good answer, other than the one that different translations reveal different aspects of the writer’s work and different impacts of that work on the literary imagination, is that Nicholson-Smith’s translation drops eight of the eighteen stanzas in Laâbi’s original poem as published in the volume *Mon cher double*, though it does include a few stanzas from later portions of the book. It should be noted that Laâbi himself decided on these cuts; as Nicholson-Smith noted in an email concerning another translation we published in *Transference* 7, “*In Praise of Defeat* is a selection by the author from his own work.”\(^5\) Yet we feel that reading the poem without these omissions illuminates aspects of the work that do not come across in Nicholson-Smith’s translation. For instance, stanzas 5 and 6 (not included in Nicholson-Smith’s translation) address the double’s interference in the use of language or perhaps even in the creative process, while stanza 8 (also not included) takes us on a rollicking ride through mythology and politics in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.\(^6\) As an example, note the following passage:

For me it’s the roller coaster
the pass of Thermopylae
Charybdis and Scylla
the Augean stables
the torment of Tantalus


\(^5\) Donald Nicholson-Smith, email correspondence with Guillemette and Allan Johnston, 31 December 2019.

\(^6\) It should be noted that the stanzas are not numbered, so our characterization of the stanzas by number is based solely on our counting of them. Similarly, Nicholson-Smith’s translation does not number stanzas, and since eight out of the eighteen stanzas of the poem are cut in Nicholson-Smith’s translation, any reference to these stanzas by number may differ from our enumeration of them.
the throes
of the Iraqi quagmire
the Gaza powder-keg

While ostensibly contrasting Laâbi’s political involvement with his double’s passivity or “coolness,” the passage takes us from the famous Greek battle into Homer’s *Odyssey*, the labors of Heracles, and Tantalus’s condemnation in Tartarus before moving on to the contemporary nightmare of Middle-Eastern conflicts. The topsy-turvy roller coaster ride is introduced by an untranslatable pun: Laâbi’s term for “roller coaster” is *montagnes russes*, literally “Russian mountains,” possibly making oblique reference to the Caucasus Mountains, and so alluding to Prometheus’s fate for rebelling against Zeus by giving humans fire, i.e., intelligence, and perhaps even life. Whether or not this is the case, the passage involves an electrifying spin through classical mythology directly into contemporary events.

The note on *montagnes russes* above suggests some of the difficulties involved in translating Laâbi’s work. Literal translation can be problematic when working with idiomatic French expressions such as this one that cannot be translated directly into English, and the situation may be further complicated if the French idiom’s syntax has been remolded and fused to reflect the sounds and structures of oral Arabic. After all, Laâbi claims that “Even when [he is] writing in French, [the] Arabic language is there. There is a musicality in Arabic, and these words enter [the] French text.” An example of this might be the following:

*L’artisan que je suis
soupçonne quelque industrie
des couleuvres
que je ne suis pas prêt à avaler
J’ai donc affaire
à un oiseleur averti
un censeur cultivé
un fin tailleur de langue de bois*

The artisan I am
suspects some talent
for snake-like deceit
I’m not ready to swallow
I thus deal
with a forewarned bird-catcher
a cultivated censor
a fine craftsman of doublespeak

The French have an idiom, faire avaler des couleuvres à quelqu’un—literally, “to make someone swallow garter snakes”—which means to feed someone false information or fibs, generally to tease, mislead, or humiliate that person. Laâbi employs this idiom in a way that splits its components and isolates images (‘des couleuvres’) while superimposing other images that bring an oral or conversational quality on the passage, illuminating the potential naivety of the recipient as well as the sophisticated craft that inspires Laâbi to write under the bewitching influence of his double. The double here seems to be construed in some ways as Laâbi’s source of inspiration, yet we get a sense that this source operates with a deliberate agenda. This last impression gets enhanced by the description of the double as a oiseleur averti (“forewarned bird-catcher”), censeur cultivé (“cultivated censor”), and fin tailleur de langue de bois (“fine craftsman of doublespeak”). Laâbi’s double here appears to serve as muse while actually directing the process of writing, possibly toward some kind of distortion or censorship. This and other passages demonstrates the way in which Laâbi’s text is paved with colorful and suggestive images that explore idioms, shape lines, and reflect the oral rhythms that emerge via this conflicted creative process.

Many of Laâbi’s idioms require unpacking, and all demand consideration of relation to overall meaning and effect. In the passage above, for instance, un fin tailleur de langue de bois, literally “a fine tailor of wooden language,” is nonsensical in direct English translation. The idiom langue de bois, literally “wooden language,” idiomatically refers to style, but more directly signifies euphemistic or deceptive uses of language,

7 English idioms associable with this French idiom include feeding someone BS or bull, making someone eat crow, selling snake oil to someone, and selling a bill of goods.
associated in *Le Petit Robert* with *novlangue*, George Orwell’s “newspeak” from *1984*. An American idiom that might come close is “forked tongue,” attributed to indigenous Americans and relating to misdirection through speech, saying one thing and meaning another. This idiom provides an image echoing *couleuvres*, and creates a serpentine field of imagery in a way not readily available in the French. However, we felt “forked tongue” would be too limited in usage (cf. its association with B Westerns from the 1950s, etc., and its concentration on ways of speaking rather than on language use as such), and so settled on “doublespeak” as a more effective way of conveying the idea.

Other idioms that reflect English usage seem too remote. For example, the lines *L’empire que l’on se dispute / en vaut-il la chandelle* that appear toward the end of the poem reflect the English idiom “not worth the candle”—an expression from the Middle Ages referring to work not even deserving candlelight, and so describing something of little significance or value. However, we decided that this phrasing seemed out of date and not reflective of the conversational style Laâbi aims at, so we adopted the outside reader’s suggestion. (One might bear in mind that the French language still uses a lot of imagery in its spoken language that might be construed as archaic in English.)

Strategies of inversion are often used in the poem; see for example the passage *De la mer / que je soulève des yeux / et porte à la cime / il s’obstine à ne scruter / que l’abîme*, which we rendered as “When I raise my eyes / from the sea / to the swelling peak / he persists in seeing nothing / but the abyss,” or the line *Plus marocain que lui tu meurs*, which we restructured as “You would die more Moroccan than he is,” though it could also have been rendered possibly as meaning something like “it would kill you to be more Moroccan” or “You couldn’t be more Moroccan.” In the latter example we stuck with the image Laâbi uses, as the introduction of “you” here points both to direct address to both the self displaced into second person (“You’re a fool,’ he said to himself”) and the (French-speaking) reader, contrasting that reader with the double who “pretends to be Argentinian.” Normally the syntax would be *Tu meurs plus marocain que lui*, leading one to consider the role of inverted syntax in the poem. Is there a relation between these inversions and the idea of doubleness? Does it reflect the Arabic orality
underneath the French text? And what is the double but the inverted self that faces you, showing you your other, perhaps unwanted, side, sometimes through the indirection of language?

From another angle, apposition and direct address, and sometimes poetic apostrophe, add theatrical and dialogic dimensions to the text, sometimes reflecting features of 17th-century French stylistic structures. Such strategies kill two birds with one stone, as they add both oral and tragic overtones to the text. We may here bear in mind the tragedies of Corneille and Racine, which were largely inspired by classical sources, recalling the classical references in Laâbi’s poem. It is important to note that the very language the colonized were exposed to mirrors the coincidental stabilizing of the French language in the 17th century through the formation of the Academy and the first stage of colonial expansion (largely in Canada, India, and Senegal). Even with the second wave of colonization, starting in 1830 with the invasion of Algeria, the “civilizing” aspect of French cultural dominance included concentration on the literary accomplishments of the French classicists.

An interesting phenomenon Guillemette Johnston has noticed about francophone writers is that they combine traditional literary French textual strategies with imagery and material from their own background. Laâbi’s writing shows this quality—the investing of idioms and structures with a different spirit and culture. The paratactic style, which is part of the oral aspect of the poem, demonstrated by non-complex structures such as J’ai donc affaire / à un oiseleur averti / un censeur cultivé / un fin tailleur de langue de bois, provides echoes of the style found in epic works of both French Trouvères and African Griots, not to mention Homer and other works from the oral tradition. A combination of the hypotactic and the paratactic styles appears in the passage L’artisan que je suis / soupçonne

---

8 See for instance Corneille’s Horace, act IV, scene 5, lines 1301–1304, in which Camille directly addresses Rome in poetic apostrophe, characterizing Rome through apposition of the object of address (Rome) with its qualities:

Rome, l’unique objet de mon ressentiment !
Rome, à qui vient ton bras d’immoler mon amant !
Rome qui t’a vue naître, et que ton cœur adore !
Rome enfin que je hais parce qu’elle t’honore !
quelque industrie / des couleuvres / que je ne suis pas prêt à avaler. This latter approach reflects the elaborate constructions of written and spoken French that became more dominant under Louis XIV, while simultaneously embedding internal and end rhymes through the echo of suis in industrie and of prêt in avaler. What makes the word play ambiguous here is the lack of punctuation, which introduces indetermination at the syntactic, rhythmic, and referential levels. The complex structuring of the syntax and line breaks enables the poet to isolate the garter snakes—des couleuvres—in one line, while the word que in que je suis and que je ne suis pas prêt à avaler link both back to L’artisan, generating a paratactic style mirrored in the listing of qualities of the oiseleur averti, the censeur cultivé, and the fin tailleur de langue de bois. The disappearance of punctuation and end rhymes built on metrical forms could reflect the stylistic modifications that occurred in 20th-century French poetry. Notably we can think of Jacques Prévert, whose poetry brings back the spoken style via a lack of punctuation, as well as an influence from surrealist poetry, which works by association and the influx of the unexpected rather than through adherence to traditional formal strategies.

Finally, there is also of course the inevitable loss or at least the shifting of sound effects and aural and cultural connections that is characteristic of poetry and fixes it in its specific language of origin. An example of one unavoidable loss appears in the stanza about cultivating the garden, where the sound play between roses (“roses”) and rosée (“dew”) in the line me faire l’abeille de mes roses … pour recueillir la rosée du firmament disappears. More obvious in this passage will be the allusion to Voltaire’s Candide, and the characteristic surrealistic shifting, as for example between the bamboo leaves that Laâbi describes polishing (...caresser les feuilles de mon bambou / et les lustrer une à une...) and the hedge of deforming/deflecting/distorting mirrors (...une haie / de miroirs déformants) that is seemingly, and suddenly, planted by the double. Through such strategies we are sucked into a vertiginous movement where both the center of the identity of the writer and the source of the writing produced on the page cannot hold still.

This book consists of 5 sections listed numerically by Roman numerals I through V, and an epilogue. Only the pieces in section III are named individually. Thus it should be clarified that the title *Mon cher double* could identify the entire collection as well as this individual section. There is no table of contents.
Dear Gaius—don’t take your Athens exile too hard. You might’ve wound up staring down barbarians. Now you’re the man who didn’t profane the Master’s estate with Roman gall. Not that he’d mind, his world a constant construction site of atomic bricks. Out my window the scene confirms it’s all traffic. The same liquid that Alexander drank to ease his ceaseless thirst upholds a farmer and his grapes on green Italian slopes. We humans crop up just like the produce we cultivate, ripen and rot, and come to no more than everything else that dies. You say, my friend, this philosophy is too harsh, a gay despair that masquerades as clear belief: it sweeps all hope along with mortal fear into the rubbish heap of superstition, leaving us no final cause to act with dignity and grace. I say if virtue needs reward or goad outside itself, it’s like fine metal mixed with baser stuff. And no sane man would rather ghost it forever by Acheron than dissipate into the stew of elements that constantly creates new forms. These days, you write, fresh prospects open before us, referring, no doubt, to strange cults from south and east. I can only advise you not place too much trust in swaddled corpse and jackal-headed figurine lest you yourself acquire an ass’s ears and snout. The only chance to live keeps knocking at the doors of our senses, and we’d be fools to keep them shut because we project some palace beyond the grave.
Sour critics like to picture us as hedonists, stuffing ourselves stupid while pretty boys with fans relieve our fevers. Pay no mind to such nonsense. Pursuit of pleasure, yes, worthy a thinking man. And don’t kowtow too fast before those patriots who bang the drum of service to our Roman thing. You know how possible the drumming out of ranks. Besides, are we the better when our young men die to stretch our vaunted borders into Spain or Thrace? The new heresy, I admit, but this gourmand can do without Spanish olives at such a price. In time this very earth will spend its store of seeds and cede its elements to furnish other worlds. Even the heedless gods have their generations. We perch between midges and mighty Olympians, our seats not the worst for savoring the spectacle.
A few years ago I got around to a work long on my must-read list, *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) by Titus Lucretius Carus, Lucretius for short. It is a lengthy poem that unfolds Epicurean materialism in compelling fashion. Upon finishing it, I turned to a sort of companion volume that had deservedly generated a lot of buzz, Stephen Greenblatt’s *The Swerve*. In it Greenblatt argues that Poggio Bracciolini’s unearthing of Lucretius’s text in a monastery library contributed significantly to Renaissance humanism and the development of the modern, empirical world. It’s the kind of scholarship that crosses over into the popular domain with its expertise intact.

But back to Lucretius. I chose to read him in A. E. Stallings’s translation because it was recent, with favorable online reviews. Though I had once done schoolboy parsing of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, I didn’t dare tackle Lucretius in the original. His thorny Latin, I’m given to understand, is not for amateurs. I had learned an early lesson in grad school when some friends and I blithely decided to stage Euripides’s *The Bacchae* in Greek. Ye gods, how I struggled to master my lines as Kadmos.

Of course, in the Lucretian-Epicurean system, the gods, should they even exist, don’t give a flip for human ordeals. We cope unsupervised, taking what pleasure we can in the ceaseless churn of life stuff, headed for the atomic morass out of which we sprang. Whether you see such physics-based philosophy as liberating or dispiriting (literally, because in this worldview the soul goes the way of all flesh) will depend on something very basic in your psychology.

I found Lucretius’s poetic treatment of these cosmic themes so personal, vivid, nimble, and concrete that I wanted to do a cameo of him at his moment in Roman history. I would not, as Tennyson did, follow the lead of St Jerome. This church father must have deemed Lucretius a threat to all right belief, as he remade him into a suicidal figure maddened by a love philtre. My portrait would be of a very sane man independent enough to cast a skeptical eye on militant Rome.

Stallings chose to render Lucretius’s dactylic hexameter lines (suited for a universal epic) as iambic heptameter cou-
plets. Splitting the difference between her fourteeners and a standard blank-verse pentameter line, I would work in iambic hexameter. This would make my lines six syllables shorter than those in *De Rerum Natura*, but, after all, I was distilling, not translating.

The first version of my monologue had Lucretius standing by the banks of the Tiber composing a response to an unidentified distant friend. After critical feedback suggesting that I should better define the dramatic situation, I decided to place my poet in a country villa writing a letter to Gaius Memmius: patron, orator, former governor, minor poet, and dedicatee of *De Rerum Natura*. Memmius went to Athens after being kicked out of Rome for a political scandal. That he bought land and planned a building project that would have endangered the remnants of Epicurus’s house (lines 3-4) seems quite a coincidence. Apparently Cicero talked him out of it.

Though some biographical sketches have Lucretius dying in 55 BCE, and Memmius wasn’t banished until 53, that death date seems soft enough to allow me the liberty I’ve taken in having Lucretius refer to the house of Epicurus. This epistolary piece reaches forward in other ways too. I’ll leave readers to figure out how Horace, Ovid, and Christ number among its rippling effects.

Source text:

Susan McLean

Four Poems by Rainer Maria Rilke

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Blind Man

Paris

Look: he walks and interrupts the town, which is not present on his darkened stage, the way a darker fissure stretches down through a bright cup. As if upon a page,

there’s painted on him only the reflection of things; he can’t receive it. Nothing but his sense of feeling stirs, as if it caught the world in little ripples of perception—
a stillness, a resistance—whereupon he seems to await the one he’ll choose: he stands, devout, and almost gravely lifts his hand, as if to give himself in matrimony.

The Donor

That was the order to the painters’ guild. Perhaps he never saw the Lord appear; perhaps no bishop, too, saintly and mild, stepped up, as in this picture, to his side and lightly laid his hand upon him there.
Perhaps this was the whole of it: to kneel like that (just as it’s all that we have learned); to kneel, to keep the contours of one’s soul, which want to burgeon outward, tightly reined within one’s heart, like horses kept in hand.

So if something uncanny should occur, something not promised and not written down, we could have hope it wouldn’t see us here and would draw nearer, then completely near, rapt and absorbed in matters of its own.

**The Arrival**

Did the coach’s turning spark this energy? Or was its source the gaze that caught and held baroque stone angels, filled with memory, standing among the bluebells in the field,

then left them, as the park of the estate pressed nearer, closing in around the drive, brushing against it, leaning from above, then suddenly let go, for here was the gate,

which, as if having called to it, now forced the house’s long façade to rotate there and afterwards stand still. Down the glass door a gliding motion flashed, and a greyhound pressed forward through its opening, and bore its thin flanks down the shallow flight of stairs.
Lady on a Balcony  
Dame auf einem Balkon

She suddenly emerges, wrapped in the wind, 
brightly into brightness, singled out, 
while now the room, as if cut down to fit, 
is filling up the door behind,

dark as a cameo’s background, which lets through 
a shimmering round its boundaries, and you 
believe it wasn’t evening there until 
she stepped outside and on the outer rail

laid just a little of her, just her hands, 
to be completely light: as if from the rows 
of houses she were held out to the skies, 
to be enrapt by everything around.
Commentary

These four poems by Rilke from his *New Poems* all deal with vision, from the blind man’s lack of sight (and the way he compensates for it), to the donor who may or may not have had the miraculous vision that he orders the painters’ guild to portray, to the emotions generated by the sights of arriving at a beloved destination after an absence, to the woman whose stepping out onto a balcony to look around is itself a vision to the one who witnesses it. In these “thing poems,” Rilke uses the outward details of the appearance of things to unlock their emotional resonances. Each of the scenes he portrays is a meditation piece: the more closely he looks at the world, the more rapturously he is taken beyond it.

The spells of these poems gain force from the pulse of the meter and the melody of the rhymes, so I have tried to imitate both in my translation. However, I have had to make some changes to keep the translations as accurate as possible and to make them sound natural and lyrical in English. Although I have made every line rhyme with another, as Rilke does, and have tried to preserve the same number of stresses in each line’s meter, I have had to resort to some slant rhymes and slight changes of rhyme schemes to do so. Also, whereas Rilke writes some poems in iambic meter and some in trochaic meter, trochaic meter is rarer in English poetry, and calls attention to itself as sounding odd and chant-like, so I have switched those poems to the more common and colloquial iambic meter.

Source texts:


-----. “Dame auf einem Balkon.” http://rainer-maria-rilke.de/090068dameaufeinembalkon.html

夏草や...  
this stagnant afternoon  
the children grown and gone  
and I left here to listen  
to that one bird who cries  
sharp as a squeaky swing... 

夢の跡

**Commentary**

Many waters meet in “Persistence of Memory.” The title comes from Salvador Dalí’s “La Persistencia de la Memoria,” not so much for the melting clocks as for the aptness of the phrase and broader mood of languid reverie. The frame here consists of the first and last lines of one of Bashō’s most plangent haiku, “Summer Grass,” from *Oku no Hosomichi*. You may follow the several stages of translation from his original through rōmaji and literal translation to a decent English haiku:

```
| 1 | 夏草や  
夏草や  
summer grass  

| 2 | natsugusa ya  
tsuwamonodomo ga  
yume no ato  
summer grass  
strong warriors  
what’s left  
of warriors’ dreams
```
“Persistence of Memory” keeps the first line’s quiet vitality and the last line’s mystical awareness of what once flourished in this place. The middle section splices (stuffs? O literary turducken!) five lines of tanka-esque trimeter into the heart of the haiku, changing out warriors for children, the heroic for the domestic, the solemn battlefield for the lonely backyard. The new lines add a touch of aural memory as the bird—a blue jay? the speaker never sees it—sings in pitch and rhythm of a child swinging. Yet the mood remains no less melancholy, perhaps more so, because more common. There are so many things and ways to lose. Where did the years go? How did we come to this?

This hybrid of hybrids crosses centuries, languages, and forms to the mutual illumination of here and now and then and there. The poem actually never translates Bashō’s haiku. My lines blend directly with his original. For the follow-up essay, however, I realized I needed to translate the Japanese. I had read countless translations but did my best to forget them so I could engage directly with Bashō. Happily, the translation I arrived at seems to be an original, no easy task when thousands are translating the same 17 syllables. The key was rejecting the rather common “ALL that’s left” as overly rhetorical and bombastic, at odds with Bashō’s quiet voice, which my “what’s left” attempts to convey. Somewhat oddly, neither “all that’s left” nor “what’s left” are literally present in Bashō’s original; these phrases seek to express the juxtaposition and implication of Bashō’s masterpiece.

Source text:

Alas

1.
In the far distance
beneath the starry skies
we both were free
in different countries and cities
the firmament
a bond for both

5.
Silence is not always golden
To the fools go the spoils
Not how to seize the day
Trains—
left home soil

Latitude

Like home the smell of his shirt
His hands, those eyes
—distance
Housemate Shopping

Five kilos of joy
two pounds of experience
four grams of respect
a bag of caution
two tablespoons of insight
was all that I brought home
from Lidl, back then
when I fell in love with
Albert Camus.

Eternal Trial

Who’s
plaintiff
who defendant
isn’t always certain
for me writing poetry
is an endless trial
Gratefully Acknowledged

You left, others came
the way I loved
they would not have come
had you not gone
you left, thank you
others came
amen.

Disclaimer

Eternal love
we pledged each another
shortly thereafter
it got too long for me
and too much for him
Commentary

Safiye Can (surname pronounced John) is an award winning poet of Circassian origins born in Offenbach, Germany whose work is appreciated for its fierce message of gender-, species-, environment-, and ethnic-equality and for her fervent promotion of the abovementioned areas of justice as well as the sheer necessity of poetry in our lives. Not only are her poems performative—her readings before an audience are characterized by her theatrical deliverance—but her poems are also frequently visual works reminiscent of concrete poetry. Thus, it is incumbent upon the translator to convey Can’s literal form by paying close attention to the interplay of each poem’s content and its visual representation—its actual shape. For instance, Can casts an earlier poem, not among those published here in translation, in the shape of punctuation symbol to underscore its thrust. “Integration” is written as a German, backward-S, question mark (that resembles the symbol for a law in legalese) and is one of Can’s most famous poems. In it, Can questions the value of integration; therefore shape can be interpreted as conveying various levels of meaning: the S in its normal, frontward direction, might be viewed as Can’s branding the poem with her initial. Its iteration as a question mark might also be viewed as underscoring the main message of the poem, which is to question any unnuanced condonement of some majority-imposed mandate requiring that immigrants lose their cultural identity by merging with their new society.

Mirroring the shape of the German original poem is not often feasible in English, however; in “Eternal Trial” the lines are arranged in German to resemble a German lawyer’s headwear. Since this headwear is not worn in U.S. courts, the poet and translator opted to change the form slightly to one more like a teardrop, since “plaintiff” contains the same root as the word “plaintive.”

Another level to be acknowledged and honored is Can’s gestural metalanguage; idioms and turns of phrase too are, ideally, to be accorded equal weight. As a translator, keeping a non-German-speaking audience in mind is important when choosing idioms so that Can’s ability to be equally at home in
disparate registers is evident in translation, too. The first stanza of Can’s poem “Alas” reveals a densely erudite register marked by brevity, while the fifth stanza conveys a more down to earth feel of idiom-driven soliloquy. The translator must strive to bring the same balance that was present in the original, whether intellectual or colloquial. Because the full-length poem (titled “Heyhat,” an archaic Arabo-Turkic word expressing something lamentable) was six pages long, the poet and translator agreed on submission of only the two stanzas printed here as both stand-in and enticement.

Equally important is a translator’s task of maintaining for the reader’s mental ear the sound of Can’s above-mentioned vocal cadences and emphases in the event that the poem ever be read aloud in English. In any case, a reader of Transference might be juxtaposing the sound of the original with the sound of the translated text.

Length of sentence in all the above poems was borne in mind at all times and adhered to whenever possible. In addition, a thrilling challenge to any translator is maintaining devices such as alliteration and bringing in etymologically-linked words in English and German whenever it does not seem contrived to do so—an example for both these principles can be seen in the three words unser beider Band in “Alas,” rendered here as “a bond for both.” Alliteration? Check! Etymology without artifice? Check!

Source text:
Can, Safiye. Rose und Nachtigall, Wallstein Verlag, 2020, pp. 11, 19, 48, 49, 47, 46.
I often see on the open plains
a village boy, or a farmer’s wife
sobbing toward a clear, wordless
sky. For a punishment, or

for a toy, broken and discarded?
For a husband’s death?
Or a son, suffering and wounded?
They cry without pausing for breath,

as if all of life were set
in a frame, beyond which
there is no human, no world.

I feel as if they come from the distant past,
a time of tears impossible to hold back,
flowing for a universe that has run out of hope.
You endured hunger in empty villages,  
your thoughts on ditches filled with the dead,  
yet you never stopped singing lamentations  
for the ruin of the solemn beauty of the human:

on the battlefield, warriors, wounded and dead  
on the horizon, stars fallen from the sky,  
thousands of horses follow clouds and disappear—  
your life is their offering.

Your poverty emits light in glimpses,  
like a saint’s tattered robe, a thread,  
a filament, in this human world

emits an inexhaustible, spiritual force  
in whose light those who govern  
are revealed to be pitiful forms.
We stand on a high mountain summit
and become a limitless view,
we become the vast, open plains before us,
we become footpaths crisscrossing plains.

Which roads, which streams do not connect,
Which wind does not bend to cloud bent to wind:
we pass through cities over mountains and rivers
and they become our lives.

Our growth, our grieving
is a pine tree on some mountain,
dense fog in some town.

We follow wind blowing, water flowing,
we become footpaths crisscrossing plains,
we become the lives of those passing by.
often we pass an intimate night
in an unfamiliar room. What is it like
in broad daylight? We cannot know, so no
need to speak of its future or past. A plain
outside our window extends beyond view.
We can scarcely recall the road we travelled
at dusk. When in the morning at last
we meet it, we know we will never return.

Close your eyes! Let those intimate nights
and strange rooms weave into our hearts:
our lives like plains beyond windows.

On the hazy plain we recognize a flash
of lake light, a tree. Its limitless view
hides indistinct futures, forgotten pasts.
Commentary

How to hold what cannot be held? How to offer shape to something that is, in its very essence, shapeless. These are the questions at the heart of Chinese poet Feng Zhi’s (馮至 1905–1993) collection *Sonnets* (十四行集), written in 1941, during the dark days of World War II.

Feng was a novelist and essayist as well as a highly acclaimed translator and scholar of German literature. He specialized in Nietzsche, Schiller, Rilke, and Goethe. *Sonnets* is held among the most important poetry collections in modern Chinese letters. Its twenty-seven sonnets describe many things from insects, to puppies, to trees, to flowers, to footpaths, to famous historical figures, but its central themes are ephemerality, transformation, and how form’s arrangement brings attention the presence of space. The latter is stated most clearly in the collection’s final poem, “Sonnet 27”:

> In flooding, formless water, someone
dips down to dip up one oval pitcher,
and the water obtains one set form.
Look, a flag rippling in autumn wind,
holding what cannot be held.

One thing that cannot be held, despite its heft and pull, is the trauma of war. And a deep thread running through the poems is the inherent ineffability of traumatic experiences. How can one possibly write of what lies beyond the mind’s frame? “Sonnet 6” puts it this way:

> They cry¹ without pausing for breath
as if all of life were set
in a frame, beyond which
there is no human, no world.

How does a frame help us see? Certainly it brings our attention to what lies within, but in Feng Zhi’s work, it also helps us comprehend the things that lie beyond. It is to this play between

¹ Chinese verbs do not require subjects, an openness that poets often use to their advantage. Thus, a way to read this line is to understand a multitude of subjects: I/You/He/She/We/They all cry for breath.
what can and cannot be held that Feng Zhi brings the sonnet, a form, a sonic frame to hold the unholdable: sound itself.

He writes about this in his introduction to the second edition of his poems:

As it regards my choosing of the sonnet, I never had the intention of transplanting this form within China. It was purely for my own convenience. I used this form, only because it helped me. Just as Mr. Li Guangtian says in his discussion of the collection, “because its layers rise and fall, it gradually both brings things into focus and releases them [...].” The form is just right for representing the things I wanted to represent. It never limited the activity of my mind; it only received my thoughts, and gave them a well-suited arrangement.

A sonnet’s arrangement (another way to frame, to form; the Chinese here is 安排, ānpái, “to set in a row”) allows Feng Zhi to highlight themes of transience and change, expressed in the turn from octave to sestet in the sonnets’—sometimes purposefully muddled—thesis/counter-argument structure. But they also suggest continuity by playing with the freedom of movement within repetition. Build, turn, resolve. Build, resolve, turn. Build, build more, sort of turn, sort of resolve. A sonnet collection arranges the antithetical: difference in pattern.

In translating poetry, it is sometimes held that form must be sacrificed for meaning, even as we know form itself is meaning. Such is clear in Feng Zhi’s sonnets. But rather than bemoan the fact that my English sonnets cannot be Feng Zhi’s sonnets, I wonder if we might think about the space that is created between their different arrangements, the way space can be seen anew when words and languages shift into new patterns, new ways of holding what cannot be held, new ways of framing and seeing what lies within, and beyond, different frames. Between Feng Zhi’s arrangements and my own, I imagine there exists a beautiful Venn-diagram, framing the negative space of language, the things and ideas that lie within and beyond each circle, the ideas that a certain arrangement of words cannot capture, but which another may.

In suggesting so much, I follow the themes of Feng Zhi’s sonnets; I follow the philosophical, the ineffable. But I would like
to pause for a moment in another realm, the political. Arrangements of words, especially when they engage different cultural spheres, stir up systems intent on power and its pigeonholing. Feng Zhi alluded to this when he wrote, “As it regards my choosing of the sonnet, I never had the intention of transplanting this form within China.” Some of his contemporaries understood his choice of the sonnet form not as aesthetic but political, an effort to advance European culture within the world of Chinese letters. These are arguments that use frames of purity, assimilation, acculturation. In English-language scholarship on Feng Zhi, another frame is common: influence. But in addition to disregarding his agency and genius, these political ideas obfuscate Feng Zhi’s unique position in the world, his ability to see within, beyond, and between many frames. They confuse the generative power of moving across languages and cultures with political discourses intent on proliferating certain arrangements.

Translation, too, travels in this disparaged border-crossing space as it shifts between frames. Indeed, the field of Chinese-English translation is rich with overlapping political positioning and creative practices. (One need only say: Pound.) Yet it seems to me that, as Feng Zhi did, we can embrace the creative, aesthetic, and philosophical possibilities of moving between frames, even as these very frames make us aware of the political.

My translations reframe Feng Zhi’s poems, but rather than an obfuscation, perhaps we can understand this to be an invitation to see what lies beyond their particular arrangement, a suggestion that underlines both their presence and their relation to Feng’s work. If you do not know Chinese, you might imagine what lies beyond the translation’s frame; you might find new insights, including ones about the familiar frames you fall back on; you might seek to find answers from the Chinese, or you might be content with the fact that between the translations and Feng Zhi’s poems there are two arrangements of words, each working to hold what cannot be held, each illuminating unholdable aspects of the other.

Source text:

Susanna Lang

_I Greet You, My Twin_

Woman, you whose sins are exquisite
who are like the orchids in Purgatory
with your claws from an untamed panther
and the rusted harmonies of melancholy.

I greet you, my twin
my untouchable
my incandescent shadow
my determined one with your scent of flowing lava.

Woman of seven modulations
in the horizon’s wounded ocher
my indestructible one
my imminent one
I see you, native ink in the palm of the hand
transparent like death
as far as silence can reach.

Nihad Salameh

_Je te salue, ma jumelle_

I Greet You, My Twin
Dance of the One / the Moon

Upright
recumbent
walking on the waters of the air
rolling down the slopes of fury
torn from top to bottom
endless river crossed at the ford
woman of black or rose-colored stone
with your scent of books and grass.

Woman, you who are city and region
shutters opened and not fully closed
born of the first gestation
parallel with your death
vast as a morsel of bread
amorous birds perch on your hips
among the most vibrant almond trees.

Woman in the midst of risk and fire
your hands tender as a wound
you who are outraged/glorified
what magic lets you prolong
the indestructible memory of our voices?

*

Young gods take root
in your unchanging fingers
where so many seasons gather
kindling Time
till morning rises.
You do not say a word when
monsters stray inside you
and space dwindles for the rose.

Lady of several universes
you remain alone in the elsewhere
in the terror that grips you:
that calm and disconsolate serpent.

Woman with the purity of grass
and the indecency of a statue
Earth fills you to the brim
ready to overflow your banks.

*

Woman, you who surge
furious sea
you swallow the poisonous algae
then retreat—may you spread out
among these many relics
in an unopened shell.

In your bridal dress
you carry your dead
all women
gloved in bees
toward scraggy islands
where you exchange open veins
birthmarks
despairing hands
and mail that has been left for you—
you have become one of them
daughter of the spark.
Gardener of infernos
or guardian of golden towers
you dance inside yourself
at the heart of the Invisible
for as long as childhood lasts.
Dance now inside the poem
on the verge of your birth:
multiple
inexhaustible
till you reach the blue of vertigo!

Dance with the force of your death
through the centuries to come
twin of the sun’s hyenas
mandala of martyred women.
Dance halfway around
the hem of our dreams—offering and prayer
to wake the oracle of the dervishes.

Lady of fields or factories
woman and earthquake
thunderstruck/thundering
with your musical limbs
dance in a sign of transfiguration
at the estuary of precipices.

Visitor from the unspeakable
dance at close range
at the four corners of grief
from the other side of flesh
around the hearth of nativities
the territory of beginnings
inextinguishable
invisible and virile.

Dance, starry with breath—
so you can raze
the forests of bones
amid the indifference of men.

Commentary

Nohad Salameh, born in Baalbek, Lebanon in 1947 and a journalist in Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War, has lived in France since 1989. Though her poetry is not limited by her country’s history or her own, it echoes with exile and the apprehension of violence. Still her poems sing, and this sequence of lyrics in particular reads like an invocation. In a 2014 conversation with Gwen Garnier-Duguy, Salameh said,

_Quand on écrit, on s’écrit soi-même, devenant simultanément le moule et le contenu ; notre langage se développe alors au rythme d’une double pulsation : cérébrale et charnelle._

[When we write, we write our selves, becoming both mold and material; our language evolves to the rhythm of a double pulse, both cerebral and embodied.]

The cerebral is not new in French poetry, and Nohad Salameh is also drawn to the surreal, having been mentored by the Lebanese poet and playwright Georges Schehadé, himself close to the French Surrealist writers André Breton and Benjamin Péret. Abstraction and surrealism can be an uncomfortable fit in
American poetry. Sitting with the translations over time as I do with my own poems, reading them aloud to hear the rhythms, I have searched for that moment of balance where the translation is true to its roots as well as to its new home.

It can be a matter of the small connective words that hold a thought together, prepositions and demonstrative adjectives. In this stanza, the prepositional phrases and abstract terms pile up in a way that is much easier to navigate in French than in English:

*Dame de plusieurs univers*
*tu demeures seule dans l’ailleurs*
*de l’effroi qui t’enlace :*
*serpent calme et pathétique.*

My first and most literal translation made my ears hurt:

Lady of several universes
you remain alone in the elsewhere
of the terror that embraces you:
calm and pathetic serpent.

Small shifts allowed me to create a structure in which the line break functions as a comma between parallel phrases, and to make the serpent more present:

Lady of several universes
you remain alone in the elsewhere
*in* the terror that grips you:
*that* calm and disconsolate serpent.

In addition, there is the distinction between *pathétique* in French, a word that Salameh returns to in other poems, and “pathetic” in English, which carries negative associations not attached to the French word. The poet and I have discussed that distinction, which isn’t easily accessible to a non-native speaker.

Salameh’s hymns to a woman come from the East extend her long-time interest in feminism, less as a political movement
than as a spiritual presence. Her most recent books are *Le Livre de Lilith* (*The Book of Lilith*, L’Atelier du Grand Tétras, 2016) and a collection of essays on women writers, *Marcheuses au bord du gouffre* (*Women at the Edge of the Precipice*, Lettre volée, 2017). Hers is a prophetic voice in a global conversation about the power women bring to the world.

Source text:

Paul Shlichta

Martha Hofmann

Crystal

Kristall

And oft my heart becomes, in wakeful night
Blue crystal, grows in caverns hid from light—
And layers form, arrayed in mystic line
Many-faced, starlike, rising through the vein—
And hears the earth-deep rhythm and refrain,
Surging with power, at the tap-root: Time.

Commentary

Martha Hofmann was born into an opulent Jewish Viennese family in 1895. She grew up to become a poet, classics scholar, journalist, and ardent Zionist. In 1927, her first trip to Palestine ended tragically with the loss of her right arm in an auto accident. The Nazi annexation of Austria led to her emigration to Palestine in 1938 and to the deaths of her mother and sister in concentration camps. She returned to Vienna in 1948 and resumed her teaching and writing there until her death in 1975.¹

Although her poems, published in eight books, were awarded several prizes, none are now in print. The present poem, included in her first collection (Das Blaue Zelt, Vienna: Saturn, 1934) and anthologized in Österreichische Lyrik der Gegenwart (Vienna: Saturn, 1934), remained in print only because of its appeal to scientists.

The first four lines evoke a resonant response in anyone familiar with the growth of crystals. Karl Przibram, one of the founders of modern solid-state physics and a pioneer in the coloring of crystals by irradiation, was particularly interested in the brilliantly blue color of rocksalt crystals found in a few potash mines. Therefore, he chose Martha Hofmann’s poem as the epigraph of his Verfärbung und Lumineszenz (Vienna: Springer, 1953). The English

¹ A detailed biography and bibliography can be found at: http://www.academia.edu/21383759/At_the_Crossroads_Martha_Hofmann_A_Zionist_Pioneer_from_Austria
translation of his book (*Irradiation Colours and Luminescence*, Pergamon, 1956) kept the poem in the original German. Translating it into English verse with the same meter and rhyme scheme was surprisingly easy. This was partly because, as in a classical Latin style, each line of the poem divides into two phrases. Each phrase allowed some latitude of near-literal translation, so that by cutting and fitting, lines of equivalent metrical form could be fashioned.

Hoffman’s other poems lie in undeserved obscurity on the dusty shelves of Austrian libraries and used-book stores, where, hopefully, future readers and translators will find them.

Source text:

Arnold Johnston

The Lovely Ship

Charles Baudelaire

Le Beau Navire

I want to recount—o soft sorceress!—
The divers beauties of your youthfulness;
    I’d paint your charms that you may see
How childhood merges with maturity.

When you go forth your broad skirts sweep the breeze
Just like a lovely ship that takes the seas
    In full sail, following the beat
Of rolling motion, languorous and sweet.

On your neck, long and curved, your shoulders soft,
Your head’s uncommon graces are set off;
    With placid air, triumphant smile,
You pass upon your way, majestic child.

I want to recount—o soft sorceress!—
The divers beauties of your youthfulness;
    I’d paint your charms that you may see
How childhood merges with maturity.

Straining the silk before you goes your breast,
Triumphant bosom like a treasure-chest,
    Its panels swelling, curved and bright
As bucklers sparkling when they catch the light.

Contentious bucklers, armed with rose-tipped stings!
A chest of secret sweets, full of good things,
    With perfumes, with liqueurs, with wines
To cause delirium in hearts and minds!
When you go forth your broad skirts sweep the breeze
Just like a lovely ship that takes the seas
   In full sail, following the beat
Of rolling motion, languorous and sweet.

Your noble thighs, beneath the silks they grace,
Arouse obscure desires, make passions race,
   A pair of witches who stir up
A potion dark in a deep-bottomed cup.

Your arms, that could toy with a Hercules,
Are glistening serpents with the power to squeeze,
   Relentless, as if to impart
The image of your lover to your heart.

On your neck, long and curved, your shoulders soft,
Your head’s uncommon graces are set off;
   With placid air, triumphant smile,
You pass upon your way, majestic child.
Invitation to the Voyage

My child, sister mine,
Dream with sweet design
Of going off to live, we two!
Loving where we lie,
Loving till we die
In that far country most like you!
Though the sky may burn,
Drown the sun in turn,
To my heart each day appears
Enigmatic, wise,
Like your wicked eyes,
Ever shining through their tears

There naught but beauty, orderly;
There pleasure, peace, and luxury.

Furniture that shines,
Polished smooth by time
Would decorate our chamber there;
Flowers of wondrous hue
Blend their fragrance, too,
With amber's waves of perfume rare.
Ceilings richly made,
Mirrors deep with shade,
In oriental splendor hung,
Whisper and cajole
The lone secret soul
With sweet words in her native tongue.

There naught but beauty, orderly;
There pleasure, peace, and luxury.
See upon these streams
Ships lost in their dreams
Of wandering with sails unfurled;
Simply there to fill
Your least wish or will,
They’ll ply the waters of the world
—Setting suns array
The fields at close of day,
The town entire, the waterways,
In hyacinth and gold;
And the world will fold
Itself to sleep in a warm haze.

There naught but beauty, orderly;
There pleasure, peace, and luxury.

Commentary

Charles Baudelaire was born in Paris in 1821. He published Les Fleurs du mal, his most famous—and controversial—book of poetry, in 1857. My translation of two Baudelaire poems from this collection—Le Beau Navire and L’Invitation au voyage—began, as many of my projects do, by chance. I found myself on a committee evaluating an honors project by a student who had chosen to focus on the differences among versions of each poem by several well-known poets and translators. In order to prepare myself for the task, and prior to reading the published translations, I did my own literal versions of both poems.

Having completed the literal translations, during which process I noted Baudelaire’s intricate rhyme-schemes and metrics, I then discovered that the published versions either avoided those formal aspects of the poems or chose to approximate them, while at the same time changing the imagery in order to meet the demands of form. At this point, I decided to produce my own versions of each poem, staying as true as I could to the meaning, spirit, and form of the originals. As with one of my earlier—and
ongoing—major translation projects, the songs of Jacques Brel, I had assumed Baudelaire’s poetry had been “done,” only to discover I had my own views on the subject. I had no real desire to denigrate the work of others; I merely wanted to see if I could translate the poems to my own satisfaction.

The basics I brought to the task were a working knowledge of French, a good dictionary; and a good thesaurus. My less obvious qualification was my being a writer—of poetry, lyrics, fiction, drama, and non-fiction—in English, the language into which I was translating the poems. Catching the letter and the spirit of someone’s work demands the ability to be your own thesaurus for units of thought larger than individual words, to find the right idiomatic expression among a range of choices, and to express a thought in a number of ways, with appropriate attention to emotional nuance and wit. The vital requirement for any writer is having the linguistic resources to provide oneself with choices, rather than being stuck with one’s first attempt, whether the task at hand is translation or original composition in one’s own language.

Poetry is often cited as the most difficult writing to capture in another language, because even in its original form a poem attempts to reach beyond the very limits of language. The considerable linguistic challenge posed by poetic translation often means that translators refrain from attempting to deal with the further complications of form, metrics, sound devices, and the like. My experience in translating songs, especially in singable versions, has encouraged me to believe that one needn’t back away from most of these challenges. In any case, my own attempts at translating these poems by Baudelaire have been guided by my commitment to rendering them in English that comes as close as possible to the original French in meaning, spirit, and form.

As for relevance to the theme of vision/seeing, “The Lovely Ship” is allowing the subject of the poem to see herself as the poet sees her, and the poem itself is his idealized vision as a painter with words. And “Invitation to the Voyage” is the poet’s invitation to the poem’s subject to share his vision, a dream of how their shared life might be in his imagined ideal world.

Source text:

Baudelaire, Charles. www.fleursdumal.org
Louise Stoehr

Five Poems by Michael Krüger

**Berlin in February**

Not to be forgotten: the beggar,
under the Friedrichstraße train line
he has his disturbing quarters
his bed a pile of debris
an opened-up grave.
Forgotten by history,
he performs a pathetic part
in the history of justice.
From afar one believes
to draw near a secret
that rests near the truth,
nearby nothing but triumph and shame.

**Hotel Maritim ProArte**

It’s four thirty two in the morning,
for an hour the plug has been pulled
from the city, it takes a deep breath.
The building across the street a file cabinet,
dark, behind just one window there is
a flicker, that is where the list is made.
Am I on it? Why so curious,
you’ll find out soon enough.
One needn’t believe everything
that Death has to say.
And then it’s light once again.
We sat in the night flimmering with heat
in front of our hotel on Meineke Street,
before us the golden cobblestones
that want to remind of previous residents,
behind us the radiating warmth of the walls
as a hunchbacked wind blew down the street,
one of those that are without an origin
and don’t know where they should sleep.
Yet they live within the four walls of the city,
you hear their somber grinding
winds on wanderings,
sensitive to voices that we don’t hear.
Three or four sparrows let themselves be carried
by it and a hard-to-read page
from the History of the Planet
that Raoul wanted to decipher over night.
Please do not disturb it says on the door sign
of a writer from Venezuela
who finally wants to sleep in.
The cold pursued me,
I heard it clatter.
An unforgettable room,
and everything in Russian.
Five years ago Russia
Invaded Ukraine,
can you remember?
Mountains trembled along with the waters
at their foundation, rock formations melt
like wax. It sends fire and
worms into their flesh,
they will eternally howl in pain.
The woman at the front desk
had snow in her eyes.
She looked so long at me
until they were empty.
Breakfast begins at seven.
Was the day lost
like so many days in Berlin?
Even in death, fingernails grow,
but then at some point it’s over.
What I absolutely still wanted to do
in the neighborhood of my early years
To forget. At the Rehwiese valley
two old people are walking toward me,
arm-in-arm, together one hundred fifty years.
They stop short, shuffle on.
When I turn around, they stop still
and look at me until we
lose sight of each other.
The last time we saw each other,
we were twelve years old and had to
cram Latin verbs.
The banged-up knees of the one,
the flaky skin of the other. Ingo?
The acacias are still there, the rhubarb
and the mole hills.
I’m overcome by a yearning
that I am not up to.
You’re mistaken, I call out to the old men,
it is not I,
you were already mistaken back then!
Commentary

Michael Krüger was born in Wittgendorf, Saxony, Germany, in 1943, and grew up in Berlin-Nikolassee. He trained as a publishing bookseller and worked from 1962 until 1965 as a bookseller in London before returning to Germany. He began his career with Carl Hanser publishing house in Munich, one of Germany’s most important publishers, as an editor in 1968, where in 1986 he became publishing director and in 1995 chief executive officer, a position he held until his retirement at the end of 2013. From 1981 to 2014, he was the editor of Akzente, Germany’s premier literary magazine. In July 2013, he was elected president of the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts and held that office until July 2019. Krüger has written over thirty volumes of poetry, several novels, and is also well known as an essayist.

At present, Krüger is undergoing therapy for leukemia that was discovered as the COVID-19 pandemic reached Europe, and is currently living near Lake Starnberg outside of Munich, Germany, in total isolation. He continues to write poems focused on his current situation for the weekly magazine insert of Süddeutsche Zeitung.

The poems above are from Krüger’s latest volume, Mein Europa: Gedichte aus dem Tagebuch [My Europe: Poems from my Diary]. By no means a travelogue, Mein Europa is a collection of impressions written over the span of five seasons as Krüger traversed the European continent. The poems are observations of and reflections on the human condition in the early twenty-first century. These reflections and observations are written in a “plain” poetic style, that is, Krüger uses colloquial language in poetic arrangements that evoke a deep sense of melancholy.

The selections here are some of the poems Krüger wrote about Berlin, the capital city of Germany. While these poems focus on only one European city, they represent much of what is important for Krüger to explore and share with his readers: Social justice, his own personal history and mortality, the difficult history of Germany in the twentieth century, and everywhere the simplicity and purity of nature that contrast with the busy life in the big cities of Europe. His focus is on the apparently simple things, birds, trees, light.
While Krüger’s poems in this volume do not present thorny translation issues, as with all translation, there are aspects of interpretation and elements of cultural awareness that need to be considered. As always, the visual representation of the words on the page, that is, the very materiality of the relative length of lines and their placement on the page should, to the extent possible, reflect the original German. Likewise, instances of poetic devices, such as rhyme and alliteration, should be represented in the English versions as well.

_Berlin in February_

In “Berlin in February,” culturally-relevant knowledge is necessary to entirely appreciate the poem. Here, it is important to recognize the central role of “S-Bahn Friedrichstraße” as one of the larger commuter train stations in Berlin and one with a notorious past during the postwar division of Germany—an aspect that is not even mentioned in the poem but is still ever present by force of the location. Today, Friedrichstraße train station is a vast maze of hallways with shops and food; its stairways, and escalators that combine commuter trains with the trains of the underground system. On the outside, the train stations covers an entire corner of a city block and attracts not only travelers but is also a hangout for local beggars and is used as shelter by a number of homeless people. Against the backdrop of the working-class and more well-to-do travelers and shoppers in this expensive neighborhood of Berlin, it takes Krüger only a few lines to evoke—in the deep, dark northern German winter—the crass lack of social justice in modern Germany as he draws the stark contrast between those who thrive and those who have been forgotten by society.

In terms of form, the English does reflect the physical appearance of the original German, most notably in the relatively similar length of the first three lines and the much longer final line of the poet. In the final three lines, the poet not only employs a sort of alliteration but actually varies the concept of “near” by using three related lexical items: _nähern_—to draw near, _nah_—near, and Nähe—nearness or the nearby, which are reflected in the English version.
Also written in winter, the poem “Berlin, Friedrichstraße Hotel Maritim proArte” reminds the reader that the bustling metropolis of this capital city virtually never rests, with, for example, no official closing time for pubs. Public transport begins as early as 4:30 in the morning and runs on a regular schedule until the last trains rumble through the city at 1:30 the following morning. Krüger poetically shortens the time span during which the city sleeps and catches a moment of this relative quiet that covers the city when he gazes at the building across from his hotel at 4:32 am, right about the time when the city is preparing to awaken to its busy life again. This cultural note makes the poem more accessible because it reminds the reader that real-life observations enter the poem.

However, even more notable is the poet’s curiosity about what is happening in that one room where he sees a light flickering. The image of someone in the eastern part of Berlin maintaining lists may lead the reader—via a flashback in history—to imagine the former Easter German State Secret Police (Stasi) still engaging in their meticulous keeping of records about everyone in that society. Of course, in light of scandals involving U.S. and German security agencies, this worry may have much more recent causes. More important, still, is that fear of being surveilled, which is immediately replaced by a definite sense of foreboding. The poet recognizes his own mortality and perhaps awaits his own death, only to realize that the new day begins and his lease on life has been renewed, at least temporarily. Indeed, images representing the end of journeys and the end of life recur throughout the poems in this volume.

Berlin-Charlottenburg

This poem begins with a group of people sitting on a warm summer evening at a restaurant or café before their hotel in the Charlottenburg neighborhood of Berlin, but this idyllic scene is immediately interrupted by the reference to “the golden cobblestones that want to remind of previous residents.” These “golden cobblestones” are Stolpersteine, or “stumbling blocks,” the
size of regular cobblestones, appearing to be golden because they are brass-clad. Created by Günter Demnig as individual testaments in memory of the murdered Jews of Berlin and Europe, thousands of these *Stolpersteine* have been laid into the regular pavement in front of the last voluntary residence of Jews before they were deported. The *Stolpersteine* identify each individual human being by name, date of deportation, and—usually—the date that person was murdered in the Holocaust.

The German reader of Krüger’s poems might also be aware of the historical background of this elegant neighborhood: the borough of Charlottenburg had once been home to many of Berlin’s assimilated Jews, almost all of whom were deported to concentration camps. And yet, nature—evoked here in the form of wandering winds and sparrows—continues its journey “within the four walls of the city,” where the poets of today live and create. So the sparrows on their flight are carried by the winds. The same winds carry away (carry out of reach) a “page from the History of the Planet,” a page that tells the history of the Nazi crimes against humanity and that now confronts the group of people in front of their hotel. And these winds also create the sounds of a “somber grinding”—what is it they are grinding down within this city?

The line *Winde auf Wanderschaft* evokes the image of winds that have embarked on the wanderings expected of craftsmen after their apprenticeship in days gone by when young men would journey from town to town learning their trade with the goal of eventually becoming a master of the trade (hence, the term “journeyman”). The German lexical item *Wanderschaft* is correctly rendered as “wanderings” in English and, therefore, maintains the alliteration of the original, yet this noun in English does not as strongly evoke this concept of journeyman as the original *Wanderschaft*.

**Hotel V, Knesebeckstrasse, Berlin**

One of the second set of autumn poems, this is perhaps the darkest poem in this selection. This poem in specific to Berlin because it was inspired by the Russian-owned/run hotel, where the poet is staying the night. Everything here is cold. The reader
is not only confronted by “everything in Russian,” with a “woman at the front desk” who “had snow in her eyes” but is also confronted with the memory of Russia having “invaded Ukraine.” There is nothing hopeful here, as Krüger first questions in lines 18 and 19 whether this particular day had been lost “like so many days in Berlin,” then driving home this hopelessness in the final line: “but then at some point it’s over.”

Images of mountains that “trembled… / at their foundation” and rock formations that “melt / like wax” evoke the agony of a country (Ukraine) punished by its bully neighbor (Russia) because of Ukraine’s desire for self-determination and a political orientation toward Europe. Again, Krüger depicts great injustice, this time on a national scale, calling on violent images of nature to depict the true extent of suffering.

Berlin-Nikolassee

The final poem in this series takes the reader back to Krüger’s childhood neighborhood, the well-to-do neighborhood of Nikolassee, originally founded as a colony of villas, or mansions, in 1901 and incorporated into greater Berlin in 1920. The poet returns here to forget, and upon a chance encounter with classmates he has not seen for over sixty years, he is consumed with memories of those early days and finds himself “overcome with a yearning that [he] is not up to.” Clearly, something happened in those days of childhood for the poet to exclaim that his former classmates “were already mistaken back then!”

Two small translation notes are of interest here. First, anyone who knows this borough of Berlin and its geography will understand the reference to Rehwiese. Literally, it translates as “deer meadow,” but this does not make much sense in English nor does it offer a sense of the actual physical location in Berlin, for the Berlin Rehwiese is an approximately one-and-a-half-kilometer-long depression in the terrain, covered with grasses and used by many people for taking walks. While it might be rendered as “dell” in English, I opted for the more easily understood “valley,” which can also represent a shallow dale or vale. Moreover, this choice best reflects the linguistic tone of the original German and is very straightforward rather than somewhat archaic.
The second translation challenge in this poem is found in the second line, which refers in German to the *Kiez meiner Kindheit*. *Kiez*, as it developed as a slang term in German and has now for some speakers been adopted into the standard language, is best rendered in English as “’hood,” but “’hood” in English evokes images of the ghetto, of a neighborhood that is less than well-to-do. Since *Kiez* is becoming more acceptable in standard German, it is possible to render it as “neighborhood,” which was the choice here. However, something then had to be done with the German *Kindheit*, which is has its direct equivalent in “childhood.” Wanting to avoid a poetic line with “-hood” followed by “-hood,” which would have distracted more from the sense of the original by adding an unintended rhyme, I chose to render *Kindheit* as “early years.” In addition, this serves the secondary purpose of maintaining relative line lengths in the English version that more directly correspond to those of the original German.

Source text:

Out of my hand autumn laps its leaf: we are friends.
We shell time out of the nuts and teach it how to walk:
then time goes back into its shell.

Sunday in the mirror,
in dreams room for sleeping,
truth in the mouth’s discourse.

My eye climbs down the sex of my beloved,
we see each other,
we say dark things to each other,
we love each other like poppy and recollection,
we sleep like wine in the conches,
like the sea in the bloodray of the moon.

We stand embracing in the window, they see us from the street:
it is time, that they knew!
It is time, that the stone made an effort to flower,
that disquiet found a beating heart.
It is time, that it were time.

It is time.
It is well known that the death of Paul Celan’s parents in the Holocaust and his own experiences during the Nazi occupation conditioned his attitude towards the possibilities of his own language. Especially in the later Celan poems we see fragment, coinages and a completely idiosyncratic use of German which reflect his probing of whether art and poetry, secularized sources of transcendent meaning, were even possible after the Holocaust. Even the relatively early “Corona” can be read as a poem that explores whether love is even possible given Holocaust experiences, but in this commentary I am going to focus on how this poem from Celan’s first major book, *Mohn and Gedächtnis* (1952) relates to the theme of vision.

I would suggest that we might read the poem in terms of describing a progression from unseen to seen, that is to say, from the speaker’s being as continuous with the natural world around him, to being an item of public recognition. In this commentary I will explain some of my translation choices as they relate to this theme.

The first two stanzas foreground the speaker as primordially unseen, one who is subject only to the rhythms of nature and the seasons. “Autumn” and “time” are each reified in mixed metaphor to underscore the speaker’s continuity with nature. Celan’s *frisst* in line 1, which refers specifically to how animals eat as opposed to humans (German uses *essen* to refer to the way humans eat) I have chosen to translate as “laps” in order to underscore the gentleness of the speaker’s relationship with nature in the first stanza. Thus autumn “laps leaf,” while time is “shelled” and taught to walk, attributes suggestive of unimpeded, yet also unquestioned natural growth.

That life moves in cycles, habits, and that humans can move with them without concern or self-consciousness is represented in the second stanza. Structurally and in terms of how the syntax jumps out of the page, the repetition of *im* [in] suggests a kind of enclosing element around the speaker, which will later be shorn off. Translated into natural English, however, this repetition which occurs in the first two lines of the stanza is less impactful since it is placed now in the middle of the sentence.
Thus, instead of translating line 6 *der Mund redet wahr* literally as “the mouth speaks true” I reiterate the “in”: “truth in the mouth’s discourse.”

The present translation of this line also serves to reinforce the sense of the habitual and familiar that is thematic of the stanza. Much as “Sunday in the mirror” detaches us from what is seen in the mirror and any broader significance such as self-reflection—the mirror becomes one among many of the human artifacts that surround us—similarly, truth itself becomes habitual, questions such as: whose truths, which truths? are denuded of significance at this stanza in the poem.

The speaker’s position in the poem only changes with the introduction of another, “the beloved” (*Geliebten*). What initially seems a sort of double of objectification—as it is expressed metonymically as the speaker’s eye which “climbs down” the sex of the beloved—is revealed in the next lines as expressive of a kind of mutuality (“we see each other”) that mimics the dreamlike and possibly a-temporal sequences in the natural world (the poppy and recollection, the wine in the conch shell, the sea in the moon). There is a savory mystery in such images, and I would venture to say that they recapitulate the sort of natural enclosure the speaker experiences in the first stanza, but in terms of a new relation to the beloved: love.

In the third stanza this mutuality turns to solidarity as a third party is introduced with respect to which the lovers feel the need to announce their love. Here the title “Corona” (from the Latin meaning “crown” or “wreath,” but also the ring of light during an eclipse) is relevant. By placing the pair in the window, presumably above onlookers in the street, Celan poses the question of what it means to bring to light that whose nature is changed once it is brought to light, love made public, christened as an object of recognition which previously existed only as a gesture of intimacy. Does the triumphal expectation of the speaker’s love set it up for failure?

The speaker, the poet and the translator each recognize the violence and rupture that may be wrought from such an abrupt transition between intimacy and public recognition. The penultimate line, as I have translated it, “It is time, that it were time,” poses difficulties in capturing the violence of the intended transition. It is obviously a matter of preference, but the “were”
of the subjunctive mood, in my opinion, conveys something of the impossibly, or perhaps, ironical ill-timing of the lover’s public unveiling. The main alternative I considered: “It is time for it to be time” seems to me to salvage coherence at too high of a cost, as it imports onto the line a sense of inevitability or closure which is absent from the violence of “beating heart.”

The “time,” as it were, as it is, as it will be and whose own existence in any given tense feels uncertain in the text, is intimacy, familiarity. It’s what moves with seasons, what we teach how to walk, perhaps how to talk, what crawls back into its shell; yet there is also a time for everything, and hence a time for this very same intimacy to stand in face of the social order—even if it is as impossible as a stone’s flowering.

Source text:

Patrick Williamson

While dreaming, while writing
(excerpt)

We add tenderness to sail by dead reckoning. The sky is vast, and drives us forward. Weapons buried, fleeces ripped off the flock, we abandon ourselves to incoherence by weaving in the air words which delight us and, in our elation, we squander this friable slice of words between existence and death where sand and waters cover up our footsteps. The gods welcome us when we dawdle on remote roads, and watch over what is no longer. We think we recognize them in spite of everything, the light reminding us of earlier worlds we freed ourselves from, our silence, enclosed in the pit of a world where birth and death no longer have their place.

Max Alhau

En révant en écrivant
Commentary

The French poet Max Alhau was born in Paris in 1936. He was a professor of modern literature and chargé de mission for poetry at the University of Paris-Nanterre. His discovery of the Alps and its landscapes shaped his writing into a celebration of wide-open spaces and the unity between man and the world. At a certain point in his poetic journey, Alhau banished the “I” from his writing to speak on behalf of all those in whom he recognizes himself. He writes lyrical and humanist poetry and while death is still present; it is seen as one with the universe. Alhau’s poetry is a constant exploration of his metaphysical reflection.

I first met Alhau back in the early 1990s, as we are both members of French translation journal La Traductière’s editorial committee. We have worked together on translations of his work over the years, some of which published in La Traductière and in an artists’ book for Editions Transignum. In the late 1990s, he asked me to translate En rêvant en écrivant [While dreaming, while writing] in order to send it to a publisher in India. The project did not come to fruition. The English poem published here is part of a larger transcreation project.

The main problem with Alhau’s work has always been how to transfer the more abstract aspects into English. I applied a formal equivalence approach at the time of the initial translation, with a certain amount of reformulation and syntax inversion so it read more naturally in the target language. Even so, the verse patterns, line breaks and rhetorical structure of the French was hard to move away from. The language is fairly straightforward, but has allusions that prove difficult to render engagingly. I was not entirely satisfied with my translation, and then became involved in other projects, as well as my work as a financial services translator and a translation trainer. I came across the translation again last year and decided a completely fresh approach, along the lines of transcreation or even expanded translation, which was required to bring out its essence: more impactful vocabulary and a complete changing of syntax, less questioning than in the source text, and more emphasis on the story aspect.

The poem starts: La rivière n’en finit pas / de descendre presque immobile / et nous de nous interroger / sur le
sens de cette dérive / alors que nous voyons / le mouvement contrarié / le voyage. I started by moving away from the format of short verses with their specific line breaks, in order to change the pace. My translation became: “The river goes on and on descending / almost motionless and we are forever / asking ourselves about the meaning of / this drift whereas we see the movement / impedes the journey.” This form was serendipity in part as I no longer had the original Word files, and the scanned text emerged as compact sections of block text, or disjointed. I was paradoxically able to see this journey aspect of the poem more clearly, as well as Alhau’s focus on landscapes and open spaces. I then revisited it entirely, discarding sections, and including elements from elsewhere.

I wanted to recount the excerpt from En rêvant en écrivant in a situated tale, but one that was not too vague nor too detailed, hence I retained the “flocks” and “weapons,” but not the verse about the wood (le bois...). I toyed with keeping his images of houses and harvests elsewhere in the poems, but decided against this, as they would distract. I also wanted to place the reader in a more past time-centric mode, hence my retaining the image of gods watching over the travelers on the roads (Quels dieux nous accueillent...). This approach dictated my subsequent selection of verses and pruning, and so the text evolved. The stanza “Entre l’existence...” [“between existence and death] was crucial as it includes key words in Alhau’s work: mots [words], friable [friable], sable [sand] and eaux [water], all of which refer to the temporality of our existence, where the “sand and waters cover up our footsteps.” This lies at the heart of the poet’s exploration. My selection of “sand” and “waters” also serves the purpose of emphasizing it is a river journey. However, I did not employ notions related to the desert (a common image in French poetry), as it was extraneous to the atmosphere I was creating, and I was striving for concision. Indeed, “The sky is vast” characterizes the horizons in both desert and river/delta landscapes.

In French writing authors often include questions, rhetorical for the most part. Alhau’s poems are no exception. One of the rules I follow as a translator is to turn these into statements. I thus broke up the questioning here into shorter sentences in order to turn it into affirmation, make the poem more active,
and draw the reader into the journey. The questions also have a sonority in their repetition: *Quels dieux nous accueillent...? Quel goût à la neige...? Qui nous répond...?* and I wanted to reproduce this with the “we,” which also reflects Alhau’s use of *nous* (*nous dilapidons...* [we squander], *quand nous nous attardons...*[when we dawdle], *nous rappelant...*[reminding us]). I thus maintain the pace of such interrogation. Moreover, the poem lends itself very well to extending this into alliteration with “we” (/wɪ́j/) and the /we/ in “weapons,” “welcome” and also in “words,” “world,” and so forth. Lastly, Alhau switches to the *tu* [you] in the last stanza of the French text, but I adjusted the translation of its last two lines to bridge this gap between *tu* to *nous* [we] and make it all-inclusive.

Source text:

**En révant en écrivant** (excerpt)

La rivière n’en finit pas
de descendre presque immobile
et nous de nous interroger
sur le sens de cette dérive
alors que nous voyons
le mouvement contrarier
le voyage.

[...]

Tu passes au crible
les villes et les bosquets.
Tu joins à tes suppliques
ce qu’il faut de tendresse
pour naviguer à l’estime.
Le ciel demeure trop vaste pour toi
la terre bien à l’écart de tes pas.
Toute existence est mésaventure
espace offert à la blancheur.

D’un trait de plume
l’oiseau nomme sa liberté.
[...]
Les armes ont été enterrées
les laines arrachées au troupeau.
Nous nous abandonnons à nos incohérences
en tissant dans l’air
les mots qui nous ravissent
et nous dilapidons dans notre allégresse
le bois qui n’a pas encore été rentré.

Entre l’existence et la mort
se situe cette part friable de mots
où le sable et les eaux
recouvrent nos pas nos rêves.
Quels dieux nous accueillent
quand nous nous attardons
sur des routes à l’écart
afin de surveiller ce qui n’a plus cours
et que nous croyons reconnaître malgré tout?

Quel goût à la neige
pour qui parcourt le désert?
Qui nous répond
lorsque nous parlons de guingois
si ce n’est la lumière
nous rappelant des terres antérieures
que la mémoire s’efforce de renier

Passer au-delà des paroles
se dépouiller jusqu’à effacer sa nudité
cela tu le sais: tu ne renies pas
les peurs les faillites les désespoirs
et tant de maux
mais tu approuves la clémence
de dieux sans cesse traqués.
Tu n’as pas été plus loin que tes perspectives.
Tu as seulement tiré parti
des fleuves des champs des landes.
Tu t’es délivré de ton silence
pour t’enfermer au creux d’un monde
où la naissance et la mort n’ont plus leur place.

[...]
I

So I blew out the candle
to light the darkness

And I saw the sun
cut off from the light

And I saw doors
and I didn’t see the houses

And butterflies
emerging from maggots
that writhed in corpses

And I was afraid my face
might be another’s face
stuck onto mine

Struck with fear
when I saw my leg
resting on scorpions

And when I got to water
I searched for a mouth in the earth

And all I found was an earth
looking like a tortoise shell
And I cried out:
Hell is all that is left
of Heaven

Heaven annihilated
only fire is left

When I went absent
my hand alone
remained present

When I came back
I found my fingers
were tongues of flame

And I said:
ah if only you knew
how much sweeter night
is to me than day

Me I empty myself
but the glass is never empty

And I sang:
foot oh my foot
voluptuous heel

And when the woman arrived
I pinched out the candle

And I cried out:
forget your language
leave your tongue alone
to chew another language
And I thought of the sun
who never sees me naked

And in the forest
I saw the wind
but never the flute

And I wrote on the air
don’t sing with the wind

(And at night
I saw birds pecking at breasts
but just at the nipples)

And I shouted to the ant
don’t go back to your house
there is a jailer there
playing with his keys
as he waits for you

And in the water
I saw a snake coming
out of my mouth

And
black
black!
In my sleep
I saw a silence

Give me a glass
so I can swallow
this emptiness
An arm
to measure out
this separation

Prepare me a bed
made of glass
so the night demons
will skid on it

I don’t want to read letters
that don’t rear up
before my eyes like nails

I will give my hand to this dog
who comes to cut some fingers off it

I will leave a lot of white in my writings
so the hooker can stroll through them
as she wills

(This is not a pen
but a pick-axe to demolish this poet
who oppresses me)

The ants will come to my funeral
and I will leave my grave for someone
who hasn’t found a place to sleep
I will leave a lot of white in my writing
to throw light on the gloom that falls
with the night of words

I will leave white
for the day of your marriage
And I saw white fleeing from white
white fleeing from the wall
and I didn’t see

And the wall fleeing from white
the earth fleeing from the ocean
and I didn’t see

And the ocean fleeing from the fish
and the fish fleeing from its skin
and I didn’t see

And I saw fear beat the cold to the ears
and the ears beat the eye to something

The something get there before the name
the name get there before the tongue

And the tongue comes out of the mouth
to enter another mouth
and I didn’t see
and I saw a bedroom without a door
and a wall gobble up a woman’s leg

And a window reaches an eye
before the other eye

A woman dead underneath a bed
and a bed on top of a live woman

A woman, a woman naked
on an earth that is all mirror
and I didn’t see
And I saw the letter in human shape
and the line a straight path to hell
and the full stops forgotten between the words
and the paper an entry ticket
to the fire

All that I have seen
I didn’t see up till now

iv

I want a bedroom
that can rest on me

And things
without name

A sea
where a wave
bursts into flame
and another rolls in
to douse it

And clouds
flaming in the sky

My hand
stroking my other hand

And a breast
in which I don’t hear
the sound of mice
So come out from this leaf
which will become a tomb for you
soon enough

Come out
of your body

Come out
of everything

I have seen a tree
branching in flames

And flames
bursting out from a tongue

I left my body
only to see that my body
didn’t look like me
leave then
and don’t enter another house
your body
is your house

Don’t
open a window
on the air

No

The maggots will come
and gnaw the mask
off your face
I have seen dogs
love wheels

Water
love writing

Me I love writing
but I don’t love
sheets of paper

This sheet here

v

This page
is made of water

So cross to the footnotes
of this page

As for me
I will get dressed
to cover up a sign
on my body

And don’t let the clothes
shut me up in the wardrobe

I got dressed
and forgot my hand

I got dressed
and your eye stripped me naked
I love
how water is naked

The tree’s vulva

The rose
that falls asleep
between the thighs

You
don’t let the earring
marry the ear

Nor the ring
become
the finger’s vulva

Let your finger
play with the fish

Let your nipple on its rounded breast
stay far from the seed of the pomegranate

I don’t want to hear a story
that begins with my head

Give me your body
so I can suffer in it

Give me a tree
so my flames can branch in it

At night I burn
and am quenched in daytime
Don’t come
I will meet you by chance

Let your hand
lick the windowpane

The sea will suck out
the juice of your eyes

Let your eyes
dribble
onto the earth
Go
leave me

Leave me
like this page does

vi

Oh Time
be far from my wrist

The glass white and empty
the one I want to be close
to her breasts

If you see me standing
don’t hand me
an empty chair

I will pick up the words with a fork
and lodge them in a cat’s mouth
Oh cat
don’t be scared of these trousers
which play alone on the roof terrace
tonight

I will lay my head
next to a matchstick
and sleep

( and I can’t grasp a darkness
thicker than this candle)

And won’t understand poets
any better than this earthquake

vii

I saw one of my eyes hungrily devouring the other
my hand ripping the lifelines from its palm
and a knife poking out of my ear
(I fled)
the lines of the notebook closing over my words

My finger stretches out to the keyhole’s eye and blinds it

A mouse slip out of a vulva
snakes slither between my fingers
heading for my neck

My bed stretches out
towards the window ledge

And bottles with broken necks
come out of the stomachs of poets
Very long downy hairs
spring out of the earth
instead of plants

A donkey’s head nailed
in a child’s bedroom

More doors than windows
more eyes than heads
more language than mouths
more blood than water
more roads than houses

( And I never saw a single poet
though I did see a jailer)

A donkey running after
a terrified fool

A cat’s head lodged
in the head of a child

A bird
pecking the belly of a pregnant woman

Darkness sticking into
the pupils

And when I wanted to write
my fingers twisted round my fingers

And I haven’t written anything
till now!
And I heard the hand ask
why these fingernails

And I heard the mouth ask
why these fangs

And I heard the head ask
why this hair

Don’t look at me with your eyes
for you will kill everything

Read me with your blindness

Lead me with your blindness
into the pleasure of things

Who did they leave this silence for
in which only the dogs bark

This street is very empty
apart from half an orange

We didn’t eat that night
we didn’t speak then
we did nothing that night
but a huge knife
appeared to us in our dreams
This candle consumes me
but doesn’t consume the pain
which feeds on my face my features

Listen kids
what is heavier
your head
or your school bag?

Hey you who leave at three in the morning
take me along too
just like the icy cold carries you along with it

Time feeds
on the hand
on the fingernails
The candle feeds
on the face of night

The silence of stone
is the hardest thing

What if the sky’s face
filled with our smoky pain
could also wrinkle!

Even if we leave with no returning
even if we all leave
we the blood sacrifice on stone
there are children here
not yet born
who will pass through this place
After a little while the sun
will gulp down water from the black night

And dawn’s blue
will shatter a few stones

And the cold will have covered
the apple of our hands

The taste of our songs
will always stay that way

You too candle
stick out your long tongue
and speak
to kill time
**Commentary**

**Literary Translation as Agencement**

“A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light.”—Walter Benjamin

“Les poèmes d’Abdallah Zrika sont comme des roses sauvages qui auraient poussé parmi des immondices.” [The poems of Abdallah Zrika are like wild roses growing on rubbish heaps.]—Abdellatif Laâbi

“I started at the age of twelve. I still see it in blue, the colour of the plastic cover of the notebook in which I write for the first time. In the sky there always seems to be a fig tree, close to my grandmother’s house. I used to write about it. There are two colours to this beginning: blue and the cold green of the fig tree.”—Abdallah Zrika

Here the poet Abdallah Zrika, through whom I have chosen to explore the theme of vision/seeing, talks about how he began writing poetry. He starts indeed by seeing. Seeing “in the mind’s eye” as we say. Already we can understand that from the very beginning of his life as a poet, Zrika’s work has been full of things, particularly things seen: his blue notebook, the cold green of the fig tree, the sky. Later in the same interview he is asked “What is poetry” and further confirms this perception:

Why poetry? This is the same question as “Why life?” Poetry is something material to me. I consider words themselves to be material. I consider them to be like things, and for

---


this reason Poetry is oriented directly towards that which is foundational and directly affects the reader. It is incisive writing rather like the splitting of a boulder.

Zrika’s poetry is a poetry of words and things, an elemental poetry, with very little if any abstraction in it. As he puts it again: “Poetry, for me, seeks that which is foundational, a negation of the difference between the word and the thing.” These orientations of the poet to his work are highly relevant when it comes to attempting a translation of his poetry.

Born in Casablanca in 1953, Abdallah’s early life was marked by poverty and precarity. The poet Abdellatif Laâbi points to the formative influence of these early experiences on his poetry: “Sa poésie en garde les cicatrices, qui dénoncent cette blessure originelle” [His poetry retains the scars, which cry out against this original wound.] He seems to write out of certain scars. As the poet Martin Harrison puts it in his “Letter from America to Ruark Lewis”:

All such choices are
delicate, often made from damage or a wound
we carry, a palimpsest of
pale bruised cicatrice beneath
its crust of blood.  

Laâbi goes on to talk about Zrika’s choice of language in the painful, exploratory task of probing and opening wounds: “les mots pour ce faire tournent le dos au lexique prétendument poétique” [The words to do this turn their back on a spurious poetic lexicon.] Here Laâbi the poet/translator concisely alludes to another important characteristic of Zrika’s poetry, its turning away from conventional poetic registers, from the canonical, with its “poetic” topics, its select lexis and its embellishments: a re-inventing of the poetic self from the ground up. This

---

4 See Martin Harrison, *Wild Bees: new and selected poems*, University of Western Australia Press, 2008.
turning away from established poetic convention is something characteristic of modernist poetry in Arabic since the 1940s and 1950s, for example in the free verse of the Iraqi aš-ši’r al-ḥurr movement of the 1950s.\(^5\) Arguably Zrika has carried this challenging tendency further than most.

Zrika started publishing poetry at the age of 20 to great popular acclaim\(^6\) and, in a period of political and social turbulence known as the Years of Lead, was arrested for disturbing public order and so-called crimes against Moroccan values and imprisoned for two years in 1978.\(^7\) Since that period he has become a prominent and admired poet in Morocco, continuing to innovate, most recently in prose poetry.\(^8\) His poetry and prose have been translated into French, including by Laâbi, but are not well known in English, though recent translations by Pierre Joris and Tim De May have started to remedy this.\(^9\)

The poems I have chosen to focus on in this essay form a sequence of ten closely linked poems entitled qaṭarāt šumūʿ in sawdāʾi/Gouttes de bougies noires [Drops from black candles], first published in Arabic in 1988 in a book entitled farašātun sawdāʾu [Black Butterflies], then again in 1998 in a bilingual Arabic-French collection Bougies Noires [Black

---


\(^7\) Associated with the radicalism in poetic style described above is a social and political contestation of entrenched social values and authoritarian regimes which meant that the path of a number of poets of the period led through jail, including his translator Abdellatif Laâbi, tortured and imprisoned for some ten years on political grounds for “crimes of opinion.” The independent and adversarial stance is encapsulated in the dedication of Joris and Tengour’s *Diwan Ifrikiya*: “To those poets of the Maghreb ad the Arab worlds who stood up against the prohibitions.”


Candles], the translations being by Abdellatif Laâbi. I didn’t want to come to Zrika’s poetry through Laâbi’s translations, wonderful as they are. I wanted to engage with the Arabic. Initially at least I thought of the French translations more as a way of cross-checking the sense I am making of the Arabic, rather as one might consult Loeb when starting to translate Horace. My practice as a translator (at least as I thought at the time) was to consult the French purely to check that my understanding of the Arabic, then put the French aside and focus on engaging directly with the Arabic original. As it turns out and as I reflect on the process here, I find myself a great deal more influenced by Laâbi’s choices than I imagined. Thus my “translation space” involves the Arabic originals of Zrika, Laâbi’s French translations and my own translations into English: the whole work filtered through a direct engagement with Zrika’s Arabic.

Before discussing my approach to the translations in detail, a word on how I understand the theme of vision/seeing as it features in Zrika’s poems. I make a semantic distinction between looking and seeing: looking being an active, volitional attending to some element in the environment, whereas seeing foregrounds the perceptual engagement with “reading the world/word,” perhaps with associations of the wonder of “getting it” (there is a similar relationship between listening and hearing). In a very real sense looking precedes seeing. Seeing is what happens when you look, as a consequence of looking. It is possible both to see something you are not looking for and to look without seeing.

Seeing can also be connected with vision: “the inward eye, that is the very bliss of solitude,” as Wordsworth put it. The seer, a term not much used these days, is one who has vision through the inward eye, not just of the here and now, but of things unseen/unseeable. Archetypally, the seer and their way of seeing is also connected to blinding and blindness. Blindness and blinding are important, indeed visceral themes, in these poems. This focus on inwardness, the inner poetic landscape or world in turn connects with another characteristic of Zrika’s poetry. As the poet says in the interview with Abdeddine and Hamza quoted at the beginning of this commentary:
I consider the work of writing itself another translation, from the “internal language” of the writer to the language through which the text manifests. Translation is not the interior/soul of the text. The text transforms upon being read, first, and that too is the reader’s translation. Each reader has his own personal translation.

In his poetry Zrika connects his inner world with the outer world and with others through the transformative capacity of language. It is perhaps how he works on pain: as we can see his inner world is a tormented one. Laâbi in his introduction points out that Zrika’s poetry is sui generis, not emerging from the Arabic poetic tradition but something that cuts across, disturbs and deranges it. “Ce Marocain marginal la dérange assurément. Il ne ‘réjouit’ pas l’oreille arabe quand il s’y exprime. Il se tient à l’écart de sa grande musique. Pire il la rappelle au désordre.” [This marginal Moroccan certainly disrupts it. He doesn’t evoke pleasure in the Arab ear when he expresses himself. He maintains a distance from its musical grandeur. Worse still he calls it towards disorder\textsuperscript{10}.] Of course, Zrika is not the only Arab poet in the modern period who has crossed the lines of the classical conventions and the expectations of poetry and suffered the consequences. Exactly the same critique, as Alkhalil shows,\textsuperscript{11} was levelled at the poetry of the Syrian Nizar Qabbani some decades before Zrika was imprisoned for supposedly offending “the sacred values” of the nation.\textsuperscript{12}

Zrika cuts across the expectations and conventions both linguistically and topically: by writing in everyday language using a relatively unmarked lexis, evoking often ugly and violent topics. His poetry will at times provoke in the reader a visceral sense of horror, repulsion. Not just seeing and vision, but excruciating images of self-harm, of damage to the organ of sight, the eye, the sucking dry of its liquids, that recall the eyeball razored in Bunuel’s \textit{Le Chien Andalou}. Literal visions of a hell of self-harm and damage, experienced unflinchingly, through the

\textsuperscript{10} In a similar vein the poet Adil Latefi comments on a certain violence in Zrika’s poetic language (personal communication).


\textsuperscript{12} Words Without Borders (https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/contributor/abdallah-zrika), March 2016.
eyes. It seems that seeing is his hell. If the raw linguistic material for these poems comes from the everyday lifeworld and the patterns of daily speech, the poetic world that is evoked is very un-everyday, challenging and oneiric, what Laâbi describes as “un cauchemar lucide,” a waking nightmare.

The poems I focus on here are full of acts of seeing, expressed in the simplest possible way in Arabic: raʾaytu [I saw]. This is the language of story-telling, indeed we find this term repeatedly used in Alf Laila wa Laila [A Thousand and One Nights] and folk tales.

fa qālat lahu zawğatuhu min āyi šayʾ in taḍḥaka fa qāla lahā šayʾ in raʾaytuwa samiʾtuhu

His wife asked him “What are you laughing about?” and he replied “about something I saw and heard.”

What is seen, however, is nightmarish: the poems are informed by an inner vision in which the violence of internal landscapes erupts into the visible, material world. And these eruptions are achieved through language, through poetry, eruptions plausibly impelled by the scars that Laâbi reveals.

A necessary preliminary for the translation process, however, is to explore the poetry not just in terms of the internal worlds it evokes and which it speaks to us, but also in its relationship to the culturally dominant, its politics. We need to locate and feel the weight of the poem, this boulder we are going to split and reassemble with a deconstructive/reconstructive pickaxe. Understood as practice, I think of the activity of translation as un agencement in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari. The translator needs to feel the weight of the text, scope it, in order to pull it apart and put it together. This agencement has the Arabic as materia prima, but also Laâbi’s French version and my emergent English version. There are also the informing cultural and linguistic politics and tensions of Arabic and French in post-colonial Morocco, the poles of which these

---

14 See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Mille Plateaux, Editions de Minuit, 2013, p. 197.
two poets illustrate so well: Laâbi writing in French, consciously echoing Baudelaire, Zrika saying unimagined/unimaginable things in a pared-down direct Arabic, cutting in a shocking way across established norms and expectations of poetic language and creating poetry of a startling beauty.

So how to translate this poetry that seems to take surrealism a step further, that has the potential to evoke horror and disgust as well as beauty or, as Zrika himself insists, horror and disgust as beauty? Laâbi in his short introduction twice refers to Zrika’s poetry as “fleurs du mal” [flowers of evil], evoking as indeed does the title *Black Candles*, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, from symbolism to decadence. The French 19th century is indeed echoed in the imagery. But then so is the Lorca of *Poet in New York*. Psychic devastation breeds imaginative violence. Where Zrika’s work diverges from the French 19th century, what irrevocably anchors it to the late 20th century and brings it closer to Lorca than Baudelaire, is the extraordinary simplicity of the language and the core lexis which he uses to create a strange, harrowing, extreme poetic world.

One parameter that emerges for this translation work is therefore not to embellish. The language of the poems more or less directly translated as both Laâbi does for French and I attempt to do for English is sufficient to allow these poems to display their energy, or as Benjamin would have it their light. These are poems that quite powerfully constrain how they can be translated.\(^{15}\) The translator is advised to stick with the core lexis that makes up Zrika’s poetic world, their everyday language patterns, and allow the poems to speak for themselves. They don’t need any help.

The second, connected to the first, is to respect Zrika’s predilection for the concrete, so strongly expressed both in what he says about the poems and the poems themselves. Typically, as I have suggested, the poems constrain the choices a translator can make due to their vividness and directness, but there are

\(^{15}\) Having said this, the interested reader might like to compare my translation of the first poem here with that of Joris (Joris and Tengour, pp. 711–13). There are many instances of different translation choices made. Even in the context of an *agencement* approach to translation, there are many opportunities for translator agency.
always choices to be made. Here is an example in which Laâbi and I make different choices:

\[
\text{wa fakkartu fī-š-šamsi}
\]
\[
\text{ʾallati lam tarani ʿāriyan}
\]
\[
J'ai pensé au soleil
\]
\[
qui n'a rien vu
\]
\[
de ma nudité
\]

And I thought of the sun
who never sees me naked

Leaving aside a contrast in tense choices, I want to focus on translation choices for the word ʿārin (adj. = naked). Laâbi chooses to translate the Arabic adjective by transforming it into an abstract noun, ma nudité = my nakedness (Arabic ʿarāʾī). This is virtually the only occasion in these four poems where he does choose a more abstract form. Typically he stays as I do with Zrika’s preference for the concrete world of things. But here he does shift, while in my translation I stay close to the original form of the Arabic, plainer and more direct. I highlight this not to make invidious judgements between the two translations but rather to point out that there are always choices between the more abstract and the more concrete. (There are also the affordances of particular languages to take into account, and French is a language gifted for abstraction.) Zrika is, as I have established, a poet who maximally prefers the world of things, for whom indeed words are things. I might add that this is also one of the few occasions in all of the poem sequence where Abdallah is seen: more often he is the seer. In the following section I will comment in more detail on some of my translation choices. I highlight four poems for discussion chiefly because they foreground seeing and vision. Where pertinent I comment on Laâbi’s choices. As pointed out above, I find that my relationship with Laâbi’s translation choices has changed in the process of writing this commentary. In the initial translation phase, I considered myself as using the French as a check or crib, launching off into my own translation. In this post hoc commentary phase I have gone back and scrutinized and inter-
It must be said that neither Zrika, Laâbi, or myself appear particularly knowledgeable about the life-cycle of the butterfly, which emerges from a caterpillar, not a worm or a maggot. The Arabic word *dīdān* can refer to caterpillars, worms and maggots. Caterpillars are not known to breed in corpses, while maggots and worms are. Both Laâbi and I choose to fly in the face of biology and follow the poetic logic of the original, translating *dīdān* as “maggots” or “worms.”

The following example illustrates what I mean by embellishment of an original simplicity:

*wa-l-farāšātu*
*tahruġu min dīdāni-l-mawta*

*Des papillons*
*Sortant des vers*
*Grouillant sur les cadavres*

And butterflies
emerging from maggots
that writhed in corpses

Both Laâbi and I, it seems, feel impelled to add to, embellish and make more vivid the original which is both lexically and grammatically simpler than the translations: translated literally the Arabic would read: “butterflies emerge from worms on/in/of dead bodies.” Did we find the original too flat in translation? The translator can also be critic. We both insert in the translation a verb to make the latter part of the image more dynamic (*grouillant*, “writhed”). The translation space for this work thus involves the dimensions of the original Arabic, the French and now my English. Laâbi is a poet as well as a perfectly fluent speaker of Arabic and French. The perfect companion in this task. The ideal translator. Even if at times I might prefer my choices, how could I not scrutinize and learn from his? This is an example of what I mean by the *bricolage* or *agencement* involved in assembling a translation, here three-way.

The poem finishes with a strange play on the trope of seeing: the poet in sleep sees silence. This is not an ordinary seeing:

---

16 It must be said that neither Zrika, Laâbi, or myself appear particularly knowledgeable about the life-cycle of the butterfly, which emerges from a caterpillar, not a worm or a maggot. The Arabic word *dīdān* can refer to caterpillars, worms and maggots. Caterpillars are not known to breed in corpses, while maggots and worms are. Both Laâbi and I choose to fly in the face of biology and follow the poetic logic of the original, translating *dīdān* as “maggots” or “worms.”
world nor an ordinary seeing, rather a dérèglement des sens that approaches the visionary.

wa Śi-n-nawmi
ra ūaytu ūamtān
ʻaswadan ūaswadan

Et dans le sommeil
j’ai vu un silence
noir
noir!

And black
black!
In my sleep
I saw a silence.

To create a dramatic and rhythmic effect I reverse the order of the lines, but there is no embellishment of the original as such, any more than there is in Laâbi’s French. Both translations echo the lexical choices and active conversational grammar of the original. The translations leave well alone. The image is left transparent to do its strange, unheimlich work. Seeing is problematized in this poetic world: something that is better done in sleep or darkness.

The architecture of poem III is built around an extraordinary tension between seeing/not seeing:

ra ūaytu / lam ūara

J’ai vu / je n’ai pas vu

I saw / I didn’t see

Having established the centrality of an agonized seeing in these poems, this poem confronts the reader with its opposite, not seeing. The poem is balanced between these poles. Zrika sets this up in what we now see as his characteristic starkness, and both translators follow. There really is nowhere else to go. There
is something grammatically and semantically strange about the phrase \textit{raʾaytu / lam ʿara}. It seems in all three languages to demand an object that is here withheld, leaving the reader in a strange existential void between the thing and its negation. This illuminates one of the characteristics of meaning making: once something is said, even if it is denied or immediately invoked, proved to be untrue, it still has an existence. These extraordinary images cannot be unsaid. But what the shape of the poem does is to trouble the notion of seeing. Again, I would defy any translator to do it differently, to mess around with the phrasing. The sensible thing is to follow where Zrika leads. Somehow Zrika’s poetry seems, among its other characteristics, to be infinitely translatable. It is in this context that one could propose, echoing Benjamin, an “aesthetics of translatability.”

Zrika’s poetry here has an extraordinary transparency, due to its elemental focus, but we see at the end of this poem a trace of quite culturally specific reference which casts further light on the \textit{cauchemar lucide} of these poems:

\begin{verbatim}
wa s-saṭra ṭarīqān mustaqīman ʾila ǧahannama
ila-n-nār

La ligne, route droite vers l’enfer
pour le feu

and the line a straight path to hell
to the fire
\end{verbatim}

There is a Qur’anic reference here with \textit{ṭarīqun mustaqīmun} echoing the phrase \textit{ṣirāṭu-l-mustaqīmi}—“the straight path (leading the faithful to salvation).” Here the path leads \textit{ʾila ǧahanama}—“to hell," echoed at the end of the verse by \textit{ān-nār}—“the fire": a synonym for hell. Sitting behind the nightmare is the vision of hell.

Poem VII inhabits a crisis of seeing. Its imagery breaks down into a distressing series of violences inflicted on the body, making the reader squirm sympathetically: auto cannibalism,
piercing, blinding. In a startling surreal image, a mouse squeezes out from a woman’s vulva.\textsuperscript{17} Again, the foundational logic and indeed materiality of seeing is violated when the poet “sees” one of his eyes devouring the other. These lines from Lorca’s \textit{Poet in New York} also evoke the violence of seeing as witnessing:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Y sé del horror de unos ojos despiertos} \\
\textit{sobre la superficie concreta del plato}
\end{quote}

And I know the horror of eyes open \\
On the defined surface of the plate

The eyes here, like Zrika’s, are beyond sleep, awake and required to witness: witnessing is another dimension of Zrika’s seeing. But what is more shocking than Lorca’s image, whose damage we read as external to the poet, is that in Zrika’s poem what he is witnessing is the violence done to the poet himself, self-harm. His notebook closes on his words. At the end of the poem his fingers are wrapped around his fingers and he has written nothing.

In poem IX, the poet is addressing another person and the focus now is, exceptionally, on looking but not seeing. The poet adjures this other not to look (\textit{la tan ẓur bi ʿaynayka}), expressing a fear that looking will cause some terrible damage, that looking kills. Instead the poet invites the other to read him through blindness, again actualizing a play with seemingly irreconcilable polarities. In a moment of exceptional gentleness, the poet invites this other through their blindness to lead him into the pleasure of things. The poet’s agony is scopic, an agony of seeing. It seems that it is only through cancelling sight that it is possible tenderly to experience the pleasure of things.

Pleasure, a wonderfully onomatopoeic word (\textit{laḍa}), is connected to \textit{laḍīḍ} (delicious) said in everyday parlance of food). The mouth literally fills with saliva in pronouncing it. The /l/ of Laâbi’s \textit{volupté}, itself a characteristically Baudelairean

\textsuperscript{17} The original Arabic \textit{faraj} can mean hole, crack or vulva. Laâbi translates this with the explicitly sexual connotation as \textit{un sexe} and I concur. The Buñuel-like potential of the image is lost if a mouse squeezes out of a simple crack: the ambiguity however indexes once again Zrika’s playfulness.
word (“luxe, calme et volupté”\(^{18}\)), captures it well. The word rolls around in the mouth. My initial choice for this phrase was “pleasure” but in writing this commentary I have come round to “delight.” Both words have this liquid /l/ which rolls around pleasurably in the mouth. For me “delight” also has an echo of Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights, something of which I discern in Zrika’s work. This suggests another, indexical, dimension to embellishment: the lexical choice in my translation indexes a work in the European visual heritage, just as Laâbi’s volupté indexes Baudelaire.

The final poem in the sequence (X) moves from the mute agony of seeing to that of speaking. Speaking that connects inner with outer.

\[
\begin{align*}
\quad & \text{‘}a\text{y}y\text{ātuha} \quad \text{āč-šam} \quad \text{‘}atu \\
\quad & \text{maddī} \quad \text{lisānāki} \quad \text{ṭawīlān} \\
\quad & \text{wa-nṭiğī} \\
\quad & \text{li} \quad \text{taqtulī-l-waqta}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\quad & \text{Toi aussi bougie} \\
\quad & \text{sors bien ta langue} \\
\quad & \text{et parle} \\
\quad & \text{pour tuer le temps}
\end{align*}
\]

You too candle
stick out your long tongue
and speak
to kill time\(^{19}\)

These are poems that translate themselves, that urgently demand to be spoken in a particular way. Uncompromising, they leave little room for maneuver for the reader/translator: they can’t be fancied or prettied up. Grotesque repeated images

\(^{18}\) Editor’s note: Baudelaire’s “Invitation au voyage,” quoted here, is translated by A. Johnston on page 61 of this issue.

\(^{19}\) li taqtulī is misprinted in the 1998 bilingual addition as li taqlī. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for drawing this to my attention, to El Mustapha Lahlali for linguistic advice on the point and to Adil Latefi for enabling me to consult the 1988 Arabic edition to confirm this. For help with the transliteration of Arabic my thanks to Sarali Ginsburg.
of auto-cannibalism, self-harm, blinding, materialize pain. As readers/translators we are suffering through the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, transfixed with illicit pleasure and violence: Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Rimbaud. Hellfire not far. Yet through the Buñuel-like, Burroughs-like savagery of the hallucinatory images, the song-lines are also strong. Beauty breaks through. Beauty is perceived not through the destroyed organs of sight but through blindness, another visionary kind of seeing that enables a tender reconnection with things. Coming through at the end, the injunction, at once bleak and affirmative, is to speak. Speak to kill time.

Conclusion

This commentary is informed by an approach to translation which sees translation not just as the relation between two texts or even three. What I have called elsewhere a practice approach to translation involves an *agencement* of the influences and factors that fold in together to construct a new object. I suggested earlier, not facetiously or metaphorically, that Zrika’s poetry demands to be translated in a certain way. To that extent the text is also an actor in the *agencement* as is Laâbi’s French translation and eventually my English one. Also in play is Laâbi’s and indeed Zrika’s saturation in French as well as Arabic literature, the sociolinguistic and political relations that pertain between French and Arabic in postcolonial Morocco and the language politics of Arabic itself, not to mention the politics of poetics in the Arab world.

My personal take on poetry translation is that it is a commitment to *poesía sin fronteras*/*poésie sans frontières*/poetry without borders/*šī‘r bidūn ḥudūd*. My preferred format for poetry in translation is bilingual, as in the collection I have drawn on in this work, where original and translated texts face each other on the page, and this too drives my approach to the translation, becomes part of its *agencement*. I was pleased to discover that Abdallah Zrika is of the same mind:

---

These days I do not try to read a poem translated from English, for example, without looking up the original text, even if I find it difficult. I believe that language is the other that wishes to see itself in the mirror of another language. (Interview with Abdallah Zrika, ArabLitQuarterly 2019)

To see yourself in the mirror of another, even if that other is blind. Perhaps especially if that other is blind. In this translation I come to recognize that I have benefitted from two mirrors, the Arabic mirror of Zrika’s poems and the French mirror of Laâbi’s translations. These poems remain a profound and provocative reflection on the nature of seeing and being seen, of the pain and damage of seeing, as well as of the possibility of healing through and beyond language.

Source texts:


Wally Swist
Lullaby

If I lose you one day,
will you then sleep alone
without my murmuring beside you,
as do branches of the linden?

Without my lying beside you, always
astir and leaving you with my words,
lowered as eyelids, across your breasts,
your arms, your mouth.

Without my watching over you, so I might
secure you, so you can be alone with
who you are, as in a garden, among clusters
of aromatic mint, the spicy star-anise.

Rainer Maria Rilke
Wiegenlied

Decay spreads through the room's stale air,
Shadows fall on yellow tapestries; the blanched sorrow
Of our hands arcs in blackened mirrors.

Brown pearls are drawn through rigid fingers.
An angel's
Eyes open, like blue poppies, in the silence.

The evening, also, is blue.
Upon the hour of our death, Azrael, liquidator and restorer,
Shadows a brown garden like nightfall.

Georg Trakl
Amen
Illustrators are considered, at best, peripheral in the art of translation. However, the books assembled and edited by Ferris Cook are quite remarkable. She has illustrated the work of Neruda and Rilke. If you, as a reader, are not discerning you will miss that her books are anthologies of previously translated material, face to face in Neruda’s case, with the original Spanish. She provides her favorite translations and, unobtrusively, includes an illustration of her own to accompany each poem. Her books of Neruda’s English translations are *Odes to Common Things* (Bullfinch Press, 1994) and *Odes to Opposites* (Bullfinch Press, 1995), as well as *The Rose Window* (Bullfinch Press, 1997). If you want to read the best of Neruda and Rilke in a lush format, read these volumes. They fit nicely in the hands and the quarter cloth bands on the spines feel wonderful to hold.

I first came upon “Lullaby” when I was twenty and just beginning to read M. D. Herter Norton’s translations of Rilke. Reading Rilke over the last 45 years has nourished me over my entire lifetime. I return to Rilke and return yet again. I also knew Stephen Mitchell, when he was a graduate student at Yale, and he would stop me on the street, and excitedly show me his newest Rilke translations. Of course, Stephen is now considered one of the most eminent of all of Rilke’s translators.

However, certain poems reintroduce themselves to you over the decades, and “Lullaby” is one of them. Every time I read that poem I see what one translator has done with it that differs from another. The poem, as lyric, could reasonably be said to define what lyric poetry is. Each line needs a distinct lightness but firmness to carry it to its destined conclusion, which are fragrances themselves, nearly the aroma of childhood and its garden—both as metaphor and as physical image.

Nearly every translation of “Lullaby” has not disappointed me but I have never found those translations adequate or fully accommodating of the rhythms, images, and lyric that I felt, saw, and heard in the poetry. “The beauty of the German,” Stephen Mitchell would relay to me on one of the streets that
intersected campus, busy with students, “is not easily transferrable into our English. It isn’t as musical.”

Somehow, through my readings of the poem, through more than four decades, I saw what was a perfectly fashioned lyric, no more and no less. I worked with my own memories of the linden and its fragrance since there is a street in New Haven named Linden Street, which is redolent every spring. I worked with the sensuality of the second verse and my own memories of what Rilke writes in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* as “the memories of many nights of love.” I worked with the final image, that of the garden, and the solitude one might find there, in Rilke’s respect of honoring our aloneness but in doing so often enough feeling the essence and closeness of another.

However, the poem needs to hit its marks, like a gymnast, and it must become the arcs within itself in matching the music it creates within that music. What I hear in “Lullaby” is not only the music of ourselves by which we can fall asleep and dream but that by which we awaken in remembering the essence of our very selves.

_Amen_

I initially read English translations of the poetry of Georg Trakl forty-five years ago, when I was twenty. The expressionistic elements of his poetry gripped me, especially with its use of images, much like that of a painter who uses mostly primary colors. There was also an elemental essence that I found in Trakl’s work, which offered itself as a haunting simplicity that presented itself in a desolate and haunting landscape. To learn that he died in WWI after attempting to treat nearly a hundred badly wounded German soldiers without the use of morphine only seems to add to the horrific qualities often found in Trakl’s poetry. If there were one painting that could summon Trakl’s poetry it would be Edvard Munch’s “The Scream.”

When I came across “Amen” in reading Robert Firmaige’s translations of Trakl’s poetry in *Song of the Departed: Selected Poems of Georg Trakl* (Copper Canyon, 2012), I recognized nearly everything that I admired in a poem by Georg
Trakl. However, as I was reading and rereading the poem in English I kept on seeing and hearing the poem differently. The images realigned differently in my vision and I saw a necessity of actually providing a brief brushstroke of an introduction as to who “Azreal” is and his importance in the closing lines of the poem.

Source texts:


Is It February?

Endless road construction.
Long-faced men
under a fake sun
scrape
asphalt’s skin,
dig out stubborn earth.
I try to sleep in my pale bed,
a diffuse scream
slices my ears.

I would call myself
Vincent Van Gogh in this country.
But I’m worried
about those two V’s.
In fact, a crow flew in
flecked at them
now
I’m Fincent Fan Gogh

My vast name:
Vincent Van Gogh.
My feelings:
Fincent Fan Gogh.
My Eyes:
a fickle future.
How can I make it so I never
lose anything
again, never gain anything?
The main character in the story I read yesterday
is a 35-year-old A.I. researcher.
In the daily I read today
a 36-year-old man
received an organ transplant.
Van Gogh
was still alive at those nostalgic ages,
daunted by daily sunlight,
wheat fields instead of parking lots
the mistral instead of exhaust gas.
He didn’t know himself past
37 years, 4 months.

Even after I die,
people will be born in painters’ toolboxes
crying red and yellow
counterfeit lifetimes
counterfeit selves.
A doctor calls the bullet that remains
in my belly a polyp.
Polyp Not angry enough, that
soft p sound.
Is It March?

Outdoor production: *Night of the Water Carriers*.

Playwright takes her seat
at the final dress rehearsal.

Dress Rehearsal—
Abbreviated: *D.R.*
Shortened to: *D.*
The theater lights, on cue.
The sound, on cue.
The costumes, in place.
Actors take their positions on the stage.

The park at night    whispering trees
dirty water drips from faucets
light hits yellow streamers
the giant jungle gym seems to breathe.
Audience seats, empty outlines on the grass.
The director, the crew and I watch the play
from our own spots
we glare at the same scene,
have separate thoughts.

It’s already Dress Rehearsal!
Even now, a single line could be changed
lighting changed
costumes changed    set changed
but    what I want to change
is the one thing I can’t.
I have this urge to scream
Stop the play!
Stop the play!
The script isn’t working. I’d murmured my worries to myself at studio rehearsals, now all flaws are revealed on Dress Rehearsal night
Stop the play!
Stop the play!
Stop the play!
Stop the play!

(Excuse me…I know it’s not reasonable but...)  
(Changes at what level? At this late date? We’ve booked the park at night, we’ve changed the date once...)  
If we wait until I’m satisfied with my own script,  
There’ll be no opening night.  
No opening night

In pitch blackness,  
I tear my script in two;  
the actors alive onstage speak my words that have no heart.
Is It November Again?

Be the rhinoceros. Wander alone.
Wander alone  Buddha says,
be the rhinoceros. Wander alone
without violence against any living thing.
without troubling any living thing.

Last night I went too far.
There was no reason to be so mean to my love.
Oh Buddha,  Oh Buddha,
though I could have been more gentle,
I couldn’t hold back boiling emotion.
The insult I hurled
came back to me today  as endless tears.

Buddha also says
In any given group of people, someone always falls in love.
They suffer this romance.
Be the rhinoceros. Wander alone
to see how love suffers.

That was me, alright. I fell in love.
I love him still.
but people are people, I am me.
The real reason I was so unkind
is anger
at never getting what I wish for
no matter how badly I want it.

Have mercy on your friends and loved ones,
Buddha continues,
when the heart is troubled,  the heart loses its mind.
Be the rhinoceros. Wander alone,
knowing you’ve lost your mind.
Harsh words from the Buddha.
I don’t mind losing my mind.
What good is it to have a mind?
I threw out my mind
for love’s sake.

Buddha also says:

*Desire’s colors are delicious and sweet,*
*disturbing inner truth in many ways.*
*There is suffering in desire.*
*Be the rhinoceros. Wander alone*

That was me all right, love, the object of my desire
source of sweetness, source of suffering.
I don’t want to be the rhinoceros,
wandering alone; I’ll be the cow, unable to wander
away from him.
Is It December Again?

A gentle voice swims through the bus:
*Ladies and gentlemen: rough road up ahead. Please take care.*
That will be a problem, driver.
I’m holding a plastic washbasin
with a goldfish in it,
The goldfish sloshes almost out of the water
at every bump.

*Ladies and gentlemen, rough road up ahead. Please take care.*
Driver, are you sloshing my goldfish on purpose,
or is the bus doing it on its own?
There are flu shots,
so can’t there be an anti-sloshing shot?

Ladies and gentlemen, I’m about to throw up, please take care.
I’m prone to motion sickness.
No motion sickness bags on board.
I do have a washbasin
but there’s a goldfish in it:
driver, do you really want
my goldfish covered in puke?

In my life, I’ve known two people named Journey.
(What parent in their right mind gives their child a name like that?)
One was a young teacher from elementary school;
the other, a fellow high school student in Literary Club.
Did they both go on journeys after that?
I’m guessing no.
Kids rarely live up
to their parents’ expectations.
This goldfish is also kind of a *Journey*. What could he be saying, his little mouth opening and closing? Will we die? Will we survive? Will we survive? Will we die? I feel he is proposing an adventure. A journey?

*Ladies and gentlemen, rough road up ahead, please take care.*
The goldfish leaps from the washbasin, I leap from the bus window and so the journey begins, a very lively jaunt full of bruises: Will we die? Will we survive? Will we survive? Will we die?

Ladies and gentlemen, the rough stretch is ending, please take care. Ladies and gentlemen, we should be experiencing some dying up ahead, please take care. Ladies and gentlemen, we’ll survive up ahead, please take care.

**Commentary**

In reading these poems from *Shinanoka* by Toshiko Hirata, you’ll notice each title is formulated as a question. “Is It February?” “Is It March?” etc. The Japanese poems are numbered in sequence from “Month One Day Seven” through “Month Twenty-Four Day Seven.” However, the Japanese word *nano-ka* means both “seventh of the month” AND “is it?” Ms. Hirata goes to great lengths to explain, in the eighth poem as well as in her Afterword, that the humorous wordplay is intentional. Therefore, we have decided to call the English collection that includes these poems “Is It Poetry?” and lose the meaning of “seventh day.” Similarly, we honor Ms. Hirata’s sense of humor by numbering poems 13 through 24 (the second year of her literary
Is It February?

Ms. Hirata’s poem begins with a complaint about “endless road construction.” Noise complaints, and a general anxiety about the outdoors, are a recurring theme throughout “Is It Poetry?” Many of the poems feature a certain reclusiveness, the reason for which seems to have to do with noise and external stimuli causing distress. On a side note, when this poem was written in 2002, Ms. Hirata would have been 37 years old, the same age as Van Gogh when he died.

In the second stanza, a crow nibbles off a *dakuten* (consonant change marker), which results in swapping the initial “V” in Vincent Van Gogh to an “F” sound: Fincent Fan Gogh. Literally, the crow must have eaten four strokes off the Japanese phoneme *vu* and left the phoneme *fu* in its place. At the end of the poem, the speaker once again complains about another consonant marker, a *handakuten* which creates the “soft p sound” in the word “polyp.”

Is It March?

This theatrical poem is a wonderful example of how Ms. Hirata can isolate a scene, and is also a good demonstration of her literary breadth. Ms. Hirata is not just a poet, but is a working author who has produced novels and essays as well as plays. We refer to Toshiko Hirata as a “playwright’s poet” meaning she has an allegiance to dramatic narrative, and the poems in “Is It Poetry?” often follow a funny or tragic story arc that is narratively well-constructed. Incidentally, Ms. Hirata told us that she actually wrote the play that is featured in this poem, and that it is still sitting on a shelf somewhere.

Is It November Again?

This deeply moving poem is a departure from the rest of the
book, and is one of only two poems in “Is It Poetry?” that were never serialized in print. About half the lines in the poem are direct quotations from a Japanese book called *budda no kotoba*, or “In Buddha’s Words,” a canonical early-Buddhist text originally written in the Pali language. This is the only poem in the book for which Ms. Hirata adds a note at the bottom of the poem: she acknowledges Moto Nakamura (1912–1999), the authoritative Japanese translator of *In Buddha’s Words*, originally written in the Pali language.

It was challenging for us to translate *In Buddha’s Words* into English, as we are now twice-removed from the Pali-language original. For example, the lines quoted in this poem come from what Nakamura refers to as the “Rhinoceros Horn Sutra,” but we learned that English-language scholars of early Buddhism drop the word “horn” opting to call the sutra the “Rhinoceros Sutra.”

Is It December Again?

The final poem in the book relies heavily on the Japanese verb *yureru*, which appears seven times in the poem. A quick search of the Weblio online dictionary offers the following translation candidates for *yureru*: “quake,” “pitch,” “rock,” “sway,” “swing,” “toss,” “tremble,” “vacillate,” “vibrate,” “jolt,” “joggle,” “waver,” “flicker.” Ms. Hirata evokes the different meanings of *yureru* by replacing the initial kanji character with hiragana lettering, thereby intentionally obscuring its meaning and allowing for numerous interpretations.

The voice of the bus driver, who uses the verb *yureru* three times in the poem, was also challenging. A bus driver delivering polite verbal warnings is typical in Japan, but bus drivers in America are not nearly so polite, so we had to develop an authentic way for the driver to speak in English. In the English version, we chose to reinforce the theme of a journey. “Rough road up ahead” was one way we translated *yureru* without needing to use a verb at all: “rough road” captures *yureru* as well as the sense of a journey.

In preparing to translate this poem, we read an excellent English translation and analysis by Carol Hayes and Rina Kikuchi published by The Institute for Economic and Business
Research, Shiga University. Hayes and Kikuchi’s translated version, titled “The Seventh of the Twenty-Fourth Month,” gets into deeper exposition of the word michiyuki. We agree with their analysis that the word michiyuki could be referring to a suicide pact between star-crossed lovers: in this case, the lovers being the speaker and the goldfish. In order to honor Ms. Hirata’s lighthearted, humorous intent, we translated michiyuki as “journey.” We went so far as to translate the proper name Michuyuki as “Journey” in order to reinforce the theme of a journey coming to its end. We feel this whole poem reflects back on the first lines of the first poem in the book, in which Hirata begins:

I’m going on a trip
Just to write
poetry.

“Is It December Again?” ends with a new journey beginning, and an existential question: do we die, do we survive?

Source texts:

Sharon Fish Mooney

On Tasso in Prison

Charles Baudelaire

Sur Le Tasse en Prison
d’Eugène Delacroix

The poet in the asylum, unkempt, weak,
Rolls a manuscript beneath trembling feet.
Beset with vertigo, inflamed with terror,
His soul sinks like a fall down an empty stair.

Mocking laughter fills his prison cell.
Strange and absurd replace reason for a swell
Of Doubts surrounding. Apprehension, Fear—
All multiform and hideous circle near.

Genius is imprisoned in this place of harm.
Grimaces gather, phantom specters swarm;
They cry and swirl and wheel behind his ear.

Dreamer awakened by screams and horror’s alarms—
This the soul’s emblem—your clouded dreams transformed
Between four walls that Reality stifles here!
Commentary

Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), best known for his book of collected verse, *Les Fleurs du Mal* [The Flowers of Evil, 1857] was a French poet, art critic, and essayist. The majority of his poems are metrical, reflecting both late Romanticism and the twelve syllable alexandrines tradition. He has been referred to by some as “the father of modern poetry,” a sobriquet that seems to relate not to his poetic style but to his wide-ranging subject matter, much of which was considered scandalous when it was first published.¹ He was also a French translator of the works of Edgar Allan Poe.

Baudelaire’s frequent use of allusions to the visual arts in poetry has long been noted.² One of his favorite artists was Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) about whom he wrote a number of essays, commenting on the “essentially poetic character” of his art.³ Baudelaire and Delacroix shared a mutual appreciation for the 16th century Italian Renaissance poet Torquato Tasso (1544–1595) who is best known for his epic poem *Gerusalemme Liberata* [Jerusalem Delivered]. Tasso suffered a number of physical and mental maladies including delusions that he was being persecuted. He was incarcerated for over six years, initially in a convent from which he escaped, and later in Saint Anne’s hospital/insane asylum in Ferrara, Italy.⁴ Delacroix produced two paintings based on Tasso and his experience.

As an ekphrastic poem, Baudelaire’s “Sur Le Tasse en Prison d’Eugène Delacroix” can be considered a type of translation, transposing the “language” of the visual arts into the written language of poetry. This poem is Baudelaire’s revision of an earlier and unpublished ekphrastic sonnet.

² See, for example, Baudelaire’s poem *Les Phares* (Beacons), in which he mentions various artists including Delacroix, Rubens, Rembrandt, da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Goya.
We can see another layer and prior example of ekphrasis in Delacroix’s two paintings of Tasso (1824 and 1839). These paintings can be thought of as types of ekphrastic translations in their own right, as his initial painting is believed to have been prompted by his reading of a French translation of “The Lament of Tasso,” a poem and dramatic monologue written in 1817 by Lord Byron (1718–1824) after Byron visited a cell where Tasso had been imprisoned.5

My own translation of Baudelaire’s poetry adds another ekphrastic layer. I have viewed a number of Delacroix’s paintings, read and reflected on Baudelaire’s poem, and then sought to translate the essence of his poem metrically, while not always adhering to a strictly literal translation. I am in agreement with poet and translator Edna St. Vincent Millay who, in her introduction to George Dillon’s and her own translations of many of Baudelaire’s poems, wrote the following: “The worst translation, obviously, other things being equal, is the one which sounds the most as if it were a translation.” She reminds us that an original poem was not a translation, but a poem, and concludes that “…the translation must not be a translation, either!—it must not appear to be.”6 I interpret her as saying that the translation should reflect the qualities of the original poem. “It is the office of the translator,” wrote Millay, “to represent the original poem as faithfully as possible, not only in its mood, its matter, its structure, and its rhythm, but also in its freshness, its sincerity, its vigour, its ease.”7

My hope is that, in my translation of Baudelaire’s sonnet I have been able to capture as many of these qualities as possible, given language constraints. In seeking to do so I’ve chosen to replace the more traditional French rhythm of alexandrine hexameter with the more traditional English rhythm of iambic pentameter, with some variations, utilizing both true and slant end rhymes throughout.

I have taken some liberties with the original French in order to maintain a metrical structure while seeking to convey Baudelaire’s meaning, if not identical word equivalents. Note,

5 https://www.bartleby.com/205/34.html
7 Ibid.
for example, my use of “asylum” in line one for cachot, usually translated as “cell” or “dungeon.” The English “asylum” seems to more clearly describe Tasso’s situation in Saint Anna’s at the time of his confinement.

In line twelve of the sonnet I’ve substituted “screams and horror’s alarms” for “dwelling” or “abode” (logis) as it appears that both best characterized his lodging at the time, generally referred to in various references as a madhouse. The rires enivrants or “intoxicating laughter” in line five may refer to the laughter of Tasso’s fellow inmates or to the poet’s personal demons, or, more likely, to both. “Mocking laughter” seemed to me to be a good metrical substitution that captured the poem’s original meaning.

The last stanza was the most problematic for me in discerning Baudelaire’s meaning, but I concluded that le Réel, translated as “real” or “reality,” is the reality of Tasso’s present situation that, within the poet’s actual and psychic prison, was “choking,” “deadening,” or “clouding” (étouffé) his soul’s dreams.

Source texts:


Delacroix’s 1839 painting of Tasso: https://www.wga.hu/html_m/d/delacroi/3/318delac.html
Michael Zhai

What Are You, Really?

Dear Reader,

We have translated the earliest known work by Du Fu (712–770), the greatest poet of ancient China. But before you read our translation and commentary, we would like you to make a try yourself at translating the original Chinese. For this purpose, we have made a rough rendering of its forty characters in all their flavors. So please get out your pen and notebook.

First, a word about how classical Chinese poems work. Chinese characters are only partially “words” as we understand them, serving a function related by syntax to other words. They are also clouds, constellations of meanings and feelings that hover in space, electrified by proximity to one another. Often questions we expect English grammar to settle for us, like the subject of a sentence, the singularity or plurality of objects, the distinction between verbs, nouns and adjectives, are left unresolved in Chinese classical poems, and the reader may clear his or her own path through the poem.

Here is a warm-up exercise, taken from another early poem by Du Fu.

陰  生  虛  籟
Shadow, hidden; birth; unreal; empty pipes; orchestra; daughter(s)

月  林  散  清  影
Moon woods; scatter; clear; shadow(s);
Here are two possible renderings of the lines. Try composing your own:

1. Am I hearing things? What is this singing
   of dark valley voices?
   Transparent shapes wandering
   through moonlit woods?

2. Shadowy valleys give birth to a phantom music
   The moon scatters clear shadows through the woods.

3. _______________________________________
   _______________________________________
   _______________________________________
   _______________________________________

Now on to our poem. Written when Du Fu was twenty-four, it recounts his visit to Mount Tai on China’s east coast. Mount Tai is not just a mountain but one of the five “Pillars of Heaven” in traditional Chinese cosmology, places of communion between the earthly and the transcendent.
You will find the Chinese characters of Du Fu’s poem and their rough rendering in English below. In the fourth line the characters “yin” and “yang” are used. They are, as you may know, cosmological duality, light and shade, known and unknown, the basis of traditional Chinese thinking. But in their origins, and particularly in this poem, they are also literally the northern (shady) and southern (sunny) sides of a mountain. That is all the background information you need. Make of the language what you will. Play around with the possibilities—make it a ballad, make it free verse, make it a rap song... make it what you think Du Fu meant or something else entirely. Our translation appears on the following page.
望 嶽
Wàng yuè
Gaze from afar; Marchmount;
Perspective; Heaven’s pillar;
Prospect (one of five Sacred Peaks of China)

岱 宗 夫 如 何
Dài zōng fū rú hé
Supreme; ancestor; indeed; really like what; how
Paramount progenitor

齊 魯 青 未 了
Qí lǔ qīng wèi liǎo
(Qi and Lu, ancient kingdoms of eastern China)
transparent blue-green; color of springtime

造 化 鍾 神 秀
Zào huà zhōng shén xiù
Create; make change; to cast metal; divine; marvel; elegant; splendor;
Transform; concentrate; spirit; holy beauty; delicate
Transfigure bell; wine vessel

陰 陽 割 昏 曉
Yīn yáng gē hūn xiǎo
(Yin and Yang, the alternating dual bases of reality; light and shade; male and female; bright and dark sides of a mountain)
cut; cleave; dusk dawn divide

蕩 胸 生 曾 雲
dàng xiōng shēng céng yún
let loose; let hang; breast; chest; give birth; layer(s); tier(s); cloud(s)
drift; dissolve heart; feelings generate; 
& thoughts; produce what’s “on your chest”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>決</th>
<th>眦</th>
<th>入</th>
<th>歸</th>
<th>烏</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>jué</td>
<td>zì</td>
<td>rù</td>
<td>guī</td>
<td>niǎo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>breach dyke or dam; pierce; break; to pop a water balloon</td>
<td>corner(s) of eye; enter eye socket(s); eye(s)</td>
<td>returning home</td>
<td>bird(s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>會</th>
<th>當</th>
<th>凌</th>
<th>絕</th>
<th>頂</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>huì</td>
<td>dāng</td>
<td>lìng</td>
<td>jué</td>
<td>dǐng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will (will definitely)</td>
<td>should; must (will definitely)</td>
<td>mount; climb; sheer; break off; confront; uttermost; extreme approach</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>一</th>
<th>覽</th>
<th>罡</th>
<th>山</th>
<th>小</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yī</td>
<td>lăn</td>
<td>zhòng</td>
<td>shān</td>
<td>xiǎo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One (at a single glance)</td>
<td>survey; scan; many; crowd; mountain(s)</td>
<td></td>
<td>small; dwindle;</td>
<td>to make small</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Michael Zhai

Afar, Gazing at the Holy Mountain

What are you, Great Ancestor?
Two kingdoms can't hold this boundless greening.

Your cauldron seethes with Creation’s splendor.
Dusk your north—your south the dawn.

Shake the clouds from your breast,
let homing birds burst your eyes!

Should I reach your highest summit,
one glance—and multitudes of mountains dwindle.

Commentary

Du Fu asks right away, “what are you, really?” Brash confrontation is followed by a feint, slipping out the side. The next line does not really answer the question, or even speak directly of the mountain (The syntax would suggest that the subject of the second line is Qi and Lu rather than the mountain). Like a Daoist adept who, with the aid of secret maps, enters the inner Mountain beyond the visible one, Du Fu knows that when one questions Nature, one should not expect a straight answer. The secrets of the real Mountain, which is neither a describable object nor the sea of hazy green, can only be divulged by words arranged into a kind of spell. The brashness and evasion of the opening lines are both part of a strategy for entering it through a side door.

But the weirdest lines by far are the fifth and sixth, which collapse the distance between climber and mountain, inverting the perspective. Is the human being speaking to the mountain here, or is it the mountain speaking to, or through the human being? Whose heart, whose eyes, whose body, whose clouds? Some commentators, armed with common sense, have insisted that the subject remain the mountain, so that the eye sockets are
caves where the birds roost. I take the line in a more surrealist-cinematic sense—as birds fly away from the viewer and vanish in the distance, their reflected images on the eyes move inward, bursting the lens and disappearing into the pupils. So the opening question, “What are you, really?” questions the perceiver, as well as what is perceived.

Like Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose heart leapt one morning for a falcon whirling in the sky, the young Du Fu one morning took the trail up toward one of China’s great mountains, and the experience burst the limits of the available language, demanding a new one. Hopkins’s “The Windhover” happens to be a sonnet, and Du Fu’s poem an eight-line “regulated verse”—both forms central to their literary traditions, so overladen with history, so rigorous in technical demands, that they practically write themselves. Yet in both these works, the forms become brittle containers for some elemental force:

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
   Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéér plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
   Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

On a first reading, the language of “The Windhover” seems as foreign to English as Du Fu’s poem to classical Chinese. Both are translations, in that sense, of a power outside of language. Like all great translations, they have brought this power into their host languages, and transformed them in the process.

The translator wishes to express his gratitude to Kidder Smith for his help and guidance translating Du Fu.

Sources:

Du Fu. “Wang Yue” 望嶽,  Du Fu Quan Ji Xiao Zhu 杜甫全集校 人民文學出版社 人民文學出版社 2014, p. 3

Notes on Contributors

Mike Baynham is Emeritus Professor of TESOL at the University of Leeds and a practicing poet and translator. A sociolinguist by training, his interests include language and migration with a particular emphasis on migration narratives and multilingualism. He translates mainly from Spanish, with translations published on the Las Flechas de Artemis on-line resource, but more recently from Arabic. He is currently translating a diwan of zajal poetry by a leading member of the new generation of Moroccan zajal poets, Adil Latefi, titled عطش يروي سيرته [Thirst Tells its Lifestory]. In 2019 he and Tong King Lee published a monograph with Routledge, Translation and Translanguaging.

David Capps is a philosophy professor at Western Connecticut State University. He is the author of three chapbooks: Poems from the First Voyage (The Nasiona Press, 2019), A Non-Grecian Non-Urn (Yavanika Press, 2019), and Colossi (Kelsay Books, forthcoming). He lives in New Haven, CT.

James Fowler teaches literature at the University of Central Arkansas. He is author of the poetry collection The Pain Trader (Golden Antelope Press, 2020). His literary essays have appeared in ANQ, Children’s Literature, POMPA, and The Classical Outlook; his personal essays in Southern Cultures, Cadillac Cicatrix, Quirk, and Under the Sun; his short fiction in such journals as The Labelter, Anterior Review, Little Patuxent Review, The Chariton Review, Southern Review, The Chiron Review, and Elder Mountain; and his poems in such journals as Futures Trading Magazine, Aji Magazine, Evening Street Review, Dash, U.S. 1 Worksheets, Caesura, and Cave Region Review.

Emily Goedde has a PhD in comparative literature from the University of Michigan and an MFA in literary translation from the University of Iowa. A translator, writer, and editor, her work has appeared in The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to World Literature, Nimrod’s Collected Works, Jade Mirror: Women Poets of China, The Iowa Review, and The Asian American’s
Writers Workshop Transpacific Literary Project. In 2019, she was Translator in Residence at Princeton University. She translates from French and Chinese.

Andrew Gudgel received a BA in Chinese from The Ohio State University, and MAs in Liberal Arts from St. John’s College, Annapolis, and Science Writing from Johns Hopkins University. He spent a decade-plus working for the U.S. government, mostly in U.S. embassies overseas, before becoming a freelance writer and translator.

Eric Hyett is a poet, writer and translator from Brookline, Massachusetts, USA. Eric serves on the Board of the nonprofit Writers Room of Boston, and teaches a memoir class, “Telling Your Story” for parents living in public housing. Eric’s poetry appears in magazines and journals, recently The Worcester Review, Cincinnati Review, Barrow Street, The Hudson Review and Harvard Review Online. In 2014–15, Eric Hyett and Spencer Thurlow worked together to translate Sonic Peace by contemporary Japanese poet Kiriu Minashita, which was published in a bilingual edition by Phoneme Media in 2017, and was shortlisted for the American Literary Translators Association’s 2018 National Translation Award, as well as the Lucien Stryk Prize for Asian Translation.

Allan Johnston earned his MA in Creative Writing and PhD in English from UC Davis. His poems have appeared in Poetry, Rattle, and elsewhere, and translations/co-translations from French and German in Transference, Metamorphoses, and Ezra. He has two full poetry collections (Tasks of Survival; In a Window) and three chapbooks (Northport, Departures, and Contingencies). Awards include an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship, Pushcart Prize nominations, and a First Place in Poetry from Outrider Press. He teaches and co-edits JPSE: Journal for the Philosophical Study of Education. His scholarly articles have appeared in Twentieth Century Literature, College Literature, and elsewhere.

Arnold Johnston lives in Kalamazoo and South Haven, MI. His poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and translations have appeared widely in literary journals and anthologies. His latest projects are a full-length poetry collection, Where We’re Going, Where
We’ve Been (FutureCycle Press); and a novel, Swept Away. His other books include the following: Sonnets: Signs and Portents and What the Earth Taught Us; Of Earth and Darkness: The Novels of William Golding; and The Witching Voice: A Novel from the Life of Robert Burns. His acclaimed English versions of Jacques Brel’s songs have appeared in musical revues nationwide, and are also featured on his CD, Jacques Brel: I’m Here! His plays, and others written in collaboration with his wife, Deborah Ann Percy, have won over 200 productions, as well as numerous awards and publications. Arnie is a member of the Dramatists Guild, Poets & Writers, the Associated Writing Programs, and the American Literary Translators Association. He was chairman of the English Department (1997–2007) and taught creative writing for many years at Western Michigan University.

**Guillemette Johnston** (professor of French, DePaul University) specializes in Rousseau and the Enlightenment and teaches French/ Francophone literature, the Yoga Sutra, psychology of fairy tales, and American inequality. Having lived in the Antilles and Algeria, she wrote on Fanon for Dictionary of Literary Biography. Her francophone courses address Islam and France, Haiti, immigration, colonialism, French Canadian literature, West Indian identity, and Maghrebi childhoods. She co-edits JPSE: Journal for the Philosophical Study of Education, and authored Lectures poétiques. Articles and co-translations have appeared in Romanic Review, French Forum, SVEC, Pensée libre, Études Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Approaches to Teaching series, Transference, Metamorphoses, and Ezra.

**Susanna Lang**’s chapbook, Self-Portraits, was released in October 2020 by Blue Lyra Press, and her translation of Baalbek by Nohad Salameh is forthcoming in 2021 from L’Atelier du Grand Tétras. Her third full-length collection of poems, Travel Notes from the River Styx, was published in 2017 by Terrapin Books. A two-time Hambidge fellow, her poems and translations have appeared or are forthcoming in such publications as Prairie Schooner, december, New Poetry in Translation, The Literary Review, American Life in Poetry and The Slowdown. Her translations of poetry by Yves Bonnefoy include Words in Stone. More information available at www.susannalang.com.
Susan McLean’s book of verse translations of Martial’s Latin poems, *Selected Epigrams* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2014) was a finalist for the PEN Center USA’s Translation Award. Her translations of poems from French, Latin, and German have appeared in *Arion, Measure, Subtropics, Literary Imagination, The Classical Outlook, Blue Unicorn*, and elsewhere. She is a professor emerita of English at Southwest Minnesota State University and lives in Iowa City.

Sharon Fish Mooney is the author of *Bending Toward Heaven, Poems After the Art of Vincent van Gogh* (Wipf and Stock/Resource Publications, 2016) and editor of *A Rustling and Waking Within* (OPA Press, 2017), an anthology of ekphrastic poetry. She won the inaugural Frost Farm Prize for metrical poetry and is the recipient of an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award for French translations. Her ekphrastic poems and translations have appeared in various journals including *Rattle, First Things, Modern Age, The Ekphrastic Review, Common Threads, Transference*, and two art museum anthologies. She has a PhD from the University of Rochester and teaches nursing research online. A Bread Loaf Translators’ Conference attendee, she gave a bilingual poetry reading of French poet and artist Jules Breton at the 2019 ALTA conference. Website: sharonfishmooney.com

Marilya Veteto Reese (Professor of German, Northern Arizona University) is the recipient of several national and international grants that permitted Circassian-German poet Safiye Can to travel to the United States in 2017 for the first time. In addition to Can’s poetry, Reese also translated micro-fiction for that year’s first honoree, Stuttgart poet Sudabeh Mohafez. Reese’s decades of translation for Istanbul-born Berlin poet Zehra Çirak include Zehra Çirak and Jürgen Walter’s *Die Kunst der Wissenschaft* [The Art of Science], co-translated with Elizabeth Oehlkers Wright. Reese recently published a chapter from Tanja Dückers’ novel *Himmelskörper* in *Translation Review*’s 100th issue. Her co-translation with Klara Schroth of an English-to-German novel, *NAVAJO LIVE/Ein Heavy Metal Leben* was published in 2018 by Hans Schiler Verlag (the original Warren Perkins book, *Pu-
trefaction LIVE, was published in 2009 by University of New Mexico Press).

**Paul Robbert**, whose work “Reflections” is featured on our cover, was Professor of Art at Western Michigan University from 1958 to 1998. He set up the printmaking department and was instrumental in establishing papermaking into the curriculum. He was one of the founders of the Kalamazoo Book Arts Center. He was well known for versatility in his choices of medium, ranging from watercolor, gouache, oils, acrylic, and ink to prints, and finally, in his last thirty years, to paper, exploiting pulp as a medium in its own right.

**John Savoie** grew up on the banks of the St Joseph River in southwestern Michigan, taught in Japan for six years, and now teaches great books, Homer to Bashō, at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

**Paul Shlichta** received a PhD in chemistry from the California Institute of Technology in 1956. He has since been a research scientist, consultant, associate editor of a technical journal, online journalist, and occasional poet. His technical biography and bibliography can be found at http://www.crystal-research.com/about_page.htm. Most of his nontechnical articles can be found at http://www.americanthinker.com/author/paul_shlichta/.

**Louise Stoehr** holds BA and MA degrees in German from Occidental College and a PhD in Germanic Studies from the University of Texas at Austin with a specialization in linguistics and computer-assisted language learning. She is Associate Professor of German at Stephen F. Austin State University. Her research interests include language learning technology, sustainability, social justice, and literary translation. Her published translations include works by Elfriede Jelinek, Uwe Kolbe, Ludwig Harig, Matthias Buth, Wolfgang Hegewald, Sarah Kirsch, Utz Rachowski, and Hans-Joachim Schädlich.

**Wally Swist**’s books include *Huang Po and the Dimensions of Love* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), *The Dao-de-jing: A New Interpretation*, with David Breeden and Steven
Transference (Lamar University Literary Press, 2015), and Candleling the Eggs (Shanti Arts, LLC, 2017). His forthcoming books are The Map of Eternity (Shanti Arts, LLC, 2018), Singing for Nothing: Selected Nonfiction as Literary Memoir (The Operating System, 2018), and On Beauty: Essays, Reviews, Fiction, and Plays (Adelaide Books. 2018).

Spencer Thurlow is the current Poet Laureate of West Tisbury, Massachusetts, USA, where he leads community readings, workshops, and more. His poetry or translations have appeared in World Literature Today, Cincinnati Review, The Comstock Review, and others. In 2014–15, Eric Hyett and Spencer Thurlow worked together to translate Sonic Peace by contemporary Japanese poet Kiriu Minashita, which was published in a bilingual edition by Phoneme Media in 2017, and was shortlisted for the American Literary Translators Association’s 2018 National Translation Award, as well as the Lucien Stryk Prize for Asian Translation.


Michael Zhai was born in Shanghai and studied German and Chinese literature at the University of California, Berkeley. He holds an MFA in English from Mills College. He is the founder of One Pause Poetry Salon in Ann Arbor, and the co-author, with Kidder Smith, of Li Bo Unkempt (Punctum Books, forthcoming fall 2020). In 2017 he won the Green House Poetry Prize for emerging poets.
We gratefully acknowledge support from Emily Brooks Rowe and from the College of Arts and Sciences at Western Michigan University. We would also like to express our appreciation to Rosamond Robbert and to Thomas Krol.

Transfère features poetry translated from Arabic, Chinese, French, Old French, German, Classical Greek, Latin, and Japanese into English as well as short commentaries on the process and art of translation. Selection is made by double-blind review. For submission guidelines, visit us online at:

scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference

ISSN (print): 973-2325-5072
ISSN (online): 2325-5099

© Transfère 2020

Cover: “Reflections” by Paul Robbert

Globe image © Don Hammond/Design Pics/Corbis

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

This issue was printed by McNaughton and Gunn using Georgia, Segoe Script, MS Mincho, SimSun, and Gabriola fonts.