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Me

Lots of contemporaries —
but “me” is not my contemporary.

My birth without “me”
was a blemished offering on the collection plate.
A moment of flesh, imprisoned in flesh.

And when to the tip of this tongue of flesh
some word comes, it kills itself.
If saved from killing itself,
it descends to the paper, where a murder happens.

Gunshot —
if it strikes me in Hanoi
it strikes again in Prague.

A little smoke floats up,
and my “me” dies like an eighth-month child.
Will my “me” one day be my contemporary?
A Letter

Me — a book in the attic.
Maybe some covenant or hymnal.
Or a chapter from the Kama Sutra,
or a spell for intimate affictions.
But then it seems I am none of these.
(If I were, someone would have read me.)

Apparently at an assembly of revolutionaries
they passed a resolution,
and I am a longhand copy of it.
It has the police’s stamp on it
and was never successfully enforced.
It is preserved only for the sake of procedure.

And now only some sparrows come,
straw in their beaks,
and sit on my body
and worry about the next generation.
(How wonderful to worry about the next generation!)
Sparrows have wings on them,
but resolutions have no wings
(or resolutions have no second generation).

Sometimes I think to catch the scent —
what lies in my future?
Worry makes my binding come off.
Whenever I try to smell,
just some fumes of bird shit.
O my earth, your future!
Me — your current state.
Empty Space

There were two kingdoms only:  
the first of them threw out both him and me.  
The second we abandoned.

Under a bare sky  
I for a long time soaked in the rain of my body,  
he for a long time rotted in the rain of his.

Then like a poison he drank the fondness of the years.  
He held my hand with a trembling hand.  
“Come, let’s have a roof over our heads awhile.  
Look, further on ahead, there  
between truth and falsehood, a little empty space.”

Translated from the Punjabi by D.H. Tracy & Mohan Tracy
Along with Mohan Singh (an acquaintance and near-contemporary), Amrita Pritam is widely credited with advancing Punjabi poetry out of a romantic-mystical mode and into a modern one where sex, politics, urbanity, and self-involvement are viable subjects. Pritam escaped from an orthodox (but very literary) Sikh background; born in 1919 and raised on what would become the Pakistani side of the Punjab, she was of a time and place in which Partition would eclipse the war and even independence as the formative historical event. The displacement and violence associated with Partition were concentrated in the region, and they occasioned her famous early poem “To Waris Shah,” a plea for peace invoking the spirit of her eighteenth-century predecessor. Pritam herself migrated from Lahore to India and settled in Delhi, where she had a career in radio. As a writer, she enjoyed great success in her time: on top of the poetry she published twenty-eight novels, a few of which were made into films, and many works of nonfiction. She was an active editor and maintained international literary friendships, notably in the Communist world, and was friends with Indira Gandhi.

Most of Pritam’s poems have a psychological charge but more or less speech-like diction and syntax. If an Urdu or English word is convenient, she uses it. One does not have to be adventurous to reach a workable English idiom, and these three translations, all done with my mother (I blame her for any inaccuracies), are reasonably close in following the originals line for line. The overall feel usually conforms to an American free-verse monologue (I sometimes think I hear Louise Glück), though in a roundabout way that is probably not an accident.

Regarding “Me,” the same first-person pronoun can function as subject or object, so at the risk of stronger Rimbaud associations one could equally have the poem say “‘I’ is not my contemporary.” The collection plate is of course a transposition; the original refers to a sort of salver used to bring alms to a shrine or temple. The word committing suicide in the third stanza seems grim, but it made my mom laugh—it has some absurd, deadpan quality I’m sure I haven’t gotten at. In her autobiography, Pritam explicitly traces her sympathy...
for the Vietnamese and Czechs to her memories of 1947. Knowing oneself, she seems to say, depends on knowing people you don’t know. In the last line, Punjabi syntax allows “my ‘me’” and “my contemporary” to abut without strain.

In “A Letter,” the word for the police’s stamp sounds like the word for an attack or ambush, and so elegantly we have the police raiding the revolutionaries even as they mark their documents. Pritam seems determined in the last stanza to go off the rails of the conceit, with the book suddenly capable of smell. The word for the cloud of stink can also indicate anger, as with the English “steamed” or “fuming,” and there is also an expression in play meaning to have a bad memory of something. The ending is very compressed and means something like “taking my situation as typical, our collective future must be obscure indeed.”

“Empty Space” is a sparsely mythologized history of two lovers at the mercy of destructive forces from within and without. They hope for some bolt-hole where human freedom might play out unhindered. In the string of location adverbs in the second-to-last line, there is a hint of something receding. The poem is in a plain style, absent of acrobatics. So far I find it her most affecting. —DHT
Music

It must be somewhere, the original harmony,
wherein great nature, hidden.
Is it in the furious infinite,
in distant stars’ orbits,
is it in the sun’s scorn,
in a tiny flower, in treegossip,
in heartmusic’s mothersong
or in tears?
It must be somewhere, immortality,
wherein the original harmony must be found: how else could it infuse the human soul, that music?
Leaves Fell

A gust roused the waves,
leaves blew into the water,
the waves were ash-gray,
the sky tin-gray,
ash-gray the autumn.

It was good for my heart:
there my feelings were ash-gray,
the sky tin-gray,
ash-gray the autumn.

The breath of wind brought cooler air,
the waves of mourning brought separation:
autumn and autumn
befriend each other.

Translated from the Estonian by H.L. Hix & Jüri Talvet
Juhan Liiv’s poetry allies itself not with Estonia’s long tradition of learning (the University of Tartu was founded in 1632, four years before Harvard) but with its even longer tradition of folk songs. Partly such alliance occurred by default: Liiv’s circumstances withheld learning from him. Born in 1864 in the tiny village of Riidma, to serfs on the Alatskivi estate, Liiv received only intermittent and limited formal schooling: three winters at the village school of Naelavere, and two years at the parish school of Kodavere. Physical weakness and mental illness constrained him, and eventually cost him his life: he died in December 1913, having contracted pneumonia after conductors (because he was destitute and could not afford a ticket) pushed him off the Tartu-Valga train into a marsh.

Alliance with folk song, though, transforms constraint into opportunity. Because folk song has been, and remains, vital to Estonian identity, Liiv can hold in Estonian culture a place Jüri Talvet compares to that of Federico García Lorca in Spanish culture. Liiv’s poems, Talvet says, “have had an impact not only among the cultivated Estonian literary public but across Estonian society.” In American culture, the closest analogue would be Robert Frost. Liiv’s poems do not resemble those of Eliot and Stevens, in which elevated diction and complex syntax issue a warning that one is entering depths; instead, Liiv’s poems, like Frost’s, present themselves as simple and homely rather than sophisticated, welcoming rather than imposing. One senses the depths and mysteries only after one is welcomed inside. So the surface of a Liiv poem, like that of, say, “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening,” bumps right up against cliche — “my little horse” is asking me if there’s some mistake — but there are depths under that simple surface.

Opening onto depths through a simple surface means tapping into resources inherent in the language itself, so the very quality that makes the poems inviting for the native speaker of Estonian makes them difficult to render in English. In “Leaves Fall,” for example, the words for “ash-gray” and “tin-gray” are compounds, tuhakarva and tinakarva. Tuh is ashes, tina is lead, and karv is literally hair and figuratively the color gray. Each joins in other compounds, such as
tinaglasuur, lead glaze, but both tuhakarva and tinakarva are normal ways of naming a color: not cliches, but not coinages of Liiv’s. So in Estonian the contrast of soft and light (ash) with hard and heavy (lead) includes subtle personification because the color is actually conveyed by the word for hair. I found no way to slip personification in through the back door like Liiv does: “ash-haired” sounds ok to my ear, but “lead-haired” sounds absurd. Even the light/heavy contrast is problematic; because “lead-gray” is too common in English, I’ve substituted “tin-gray,” since tina can also name tin.

But perhaps this is only a typical translator’s lament: speaking of Frost, he is supposed to have said that “poetry is what gets lost in translation.” For these poems, Jüri and I hope that readers will intuit — will find — what the translations have lost. — HLH
Doric

With her hair closely cropped up to the nape
Like Dorian Apollo’s, the girl lay on the narrow
Pallet, keeping her limbs stiffly frozen
Within a heavy cloud she could not escape …

Artemis emptied her quiver — every arrow
Shot through her body. And though very soon
She’d be no virgin, like cold honeycomb,
Her virgin thighs still kept her pleasure sealed …

As if to the arena, the youth came
Oiled with myrrh, and like a wrestler kneeled
To pin her down; and although he broke past

Her arms that she had thrust against his chest,
Only much later, with one cry, face to face,
Did they join lips, and out of their sweat, embrace …
Yannis Keats

A branch, the hand of Apollo,
The plane tree’s polished, broad bough,
Spread above you, may it bring you
The universe’s immortal peace.

You’d meet me on the broad and shining shore
Of Pylos, so I’d planned,
With Mentor’s tall ship pulled up on the beach
Snug in the sand.

We would be bound, as those who sailed with the gods,
In the winged friendship of youth,
And would take our seats in the stone thrones that Time
And custom had made smooth

And meet that man who still in the third generation
Reigned serene, a sage
Whose tales of travels and holy decrees had ripened
In his mind with age—

At dawn, we’d attend the sacrifice to the gods,
The ritual slaughters
Of the three-year-old heifers, and hear the single cry
That rose from his three daughters

When the axe thwacked, and the black-fringed, slow-rolling eye
Drowned in a swoon
Of darkness, and the gilt horns were rendered idle,
A hazy half moon.

My love imagined you, as a sister her brother,
In your virginal bath,
How Polycaste rinsed your naked body and dressed you
In a robe of fine cloth.
I thought to prod you a little with my foot
As dawn was about to break:
*The gleaming chariot’s yoked for us and ready.*
*No time to lose! Awake!*

And to spend all day in the talk that comes and goes,
Or silence, when no one spoke,
While we drove the horses who were always leaning one way
Or another against the yoke,

But most of all I wanted to see your eyes,
Your deer-like eyes, behold
The palace of Menelaus, and forget themselves
In bronze and the gleam of gold,

Unwavering gaze, sinking the sight so deep,
You’d never remember
The figured silver, the ivory, gilded or white,
The heavy amber,

And I thought that I would say in a hushed voice
Leaning close to your ear,
*Watch out, my friend, because in a moment, soon,*
*Helen will appear*

*Before our very eyes, the one and only*
*Daughter of the Swan,*
*And then we will sink our eyelids in the river*
*Of Oblivion.*
So brightly I saw you; but what grassy roads
    Have led me to your tomb!
And the blazing roses with which I strew your grave
    And make all Rome abloom,

Light the way unto your golden songs
    As though they were the brave,
Armed bodies that turn to dust before one’s eyes
    In an ancient, new-breached grave,

And all the worthy treasure of Mycenae,
    The golden plunder
I thought to lay before you — goblet, sword,
    And diadem — past wonder,

A mask on your dead beauty like the mask
    That covered the face
Of the king of the Achaens — all gold, all artifice,
    Hammered upon Death’s trace.

Translated from the Modern Greek by A.E. Stallings
Angelos Sikelianos is perhaps best summed up by David Ricks in his anthology, *Modern Greek Writing* (Peter Owen Publishers, 2003):

Prolific, vatic, uneven, yet a master of many complex forms, no twentieth-century Greek poet is more deserving of serious attention ... yet no poet is so the despair of the translator.

The complex forms (Sikelianos considered himself an heir to Pindar), usually rhymed, in traditional or nonce stanzas or wildly heterometric, are actually part of what attracts me as a translator — the maddening challenge of getting his bold, rhymed sonnets, for instance, accurately into bold, rhymed English. He was the first Greek poet nominated for the Nobel, though he never received the prize. He is often compared to Yeats, another poet/playwright of artistic greatness and idiosyncratic philosophy. (Take “Doric” and “Leda and the Swan,” for instance: both are sonnets of an eroticized rape/rapture at a safe Classical or mythological remove.)

“Doric” had long puzzled me — it appears to be set in ancient Greece, but why, and why Doric? I first encountered it in Keeley’s and Sherrard’s fine free-verse translation. The poem fully exploits that top-heavy asymmetry that gives the sonnet its dynamic energy differential: virginity versus sex, stasis versus conflict. But I only understood what this poem was “about” when I translated it for myself. The importance of the girl’s hair being shorn off (*therismeni* — “harvested” or “reaped”) suddenly triggered the realization: she is a Spartan bride. (The Spartans spoke a Doric dialect.) A Spartan marriage was a curious affair: the bride, who had been ritually abducted, sheared off her tresses and awaited her bridegroom on a straw mattress in a pitch-dark room. Spartan maidens, like Spartan youths, received a formal education that included wrestling. Their marriage was consummated in secret, and for some time after, the pair met in clandestine assignations to whet their desire. I should have long ago picked up the obvious clue: Sikelianos places this sonnet between sonnets called, respectively, “Sparta” and “The Virgin of Sparta.”

“Yannis Keats” (from 1915) is a very different use of the Classical
past. Sikelianos maintained a life-long interest in John Keats, delivering a lecture on him at the British Council in Athens towards the end of his life. What first grabs our attention is the title: not John Keats, but Yannis Keats (not even the formal “Ioannis”). He is making Keats a Greek and an equal, a friend. Strangely, the poem is set not in the present nor in Keats’s nineteenth century, but in Homer’s Bronze Age. In fact, we find ourselves smack in the midst of the Odyssey, with Keats as Odysseus’s son, Telemachus, at the brink of manhood, and the speaker as Pisistratus, his young friend and companion, son of Nestor. The details (such as the nudging of the foot) are taken straight out of Homer, and the scenes have a freshness and sparkle, not the old world traversed by long-suffering Odysseus, but a new world of adventure just opening up to young heroes. In a sleight of imagination, this vividly present ancient world also partakes of Keats—when we go to see the ritual sacrifice of the heifers, are we not the citizens who have emptied the town one pious morn in “Ode on a Grecian Urn”? Together the young companions make a road trip to see Menelaus and, especially, the bewitching Helen (daughter of aforementioned Leda and Swan). Yet the poem closes with a rejection of all this—Keats is in fact dead, in Rome.

In the last stanzas, Sikelianos performs yet another feat of connections. Keats’s death mask at the Spanish Steps becomes the gold mask exhumed at Mycenae in 1876 by Heinrich Schliemann, who said, “I have looked upon the face of Agamemnon.” The distance between Sikelianos and Keats suddenly widens into an impassible and impossible gulf—if “Ode on a Grecian Urn” projects into a future, “midst of other woe/Than ours,” “Yannis Keats” plumbs into the past—death has made Keats as ancient as a Mycenean tomb, and the marvels with which the speaker wanted to dazzle him, dusty grave goods of antiquity. —aes
Look straight, and don’t tremble, wreckage of my hanged race:
a sarabande dancer, Japanese muslin tight on her live-wire hips
arrives with the moonlight, fast as the tam-tam drums.
She’ll take you to the grand esplanade where the gallows
tell your story, tell of your dim bronze halos
licked away by a pale man’s greed.

Leave your gallows tears behind,
the long-drawn vowels of the lost names of flowers,
the long-drawn cries of your burden of grain,
the long-drawn cries of your burden of seed-pods,
and the long-drawn cries of the seed-pods cut and hung.
Shipwreck of my race, twisted in the wind-rush,
fall from your broken gallows, wrack, wreck, and driftwood,
my bloodied race.
My bloodied race fearful, scab-dried, sterile, paralyzed,
the low-caste wallflowers trembling at a ball for mice—
no. Leave your gallows, there, those: the gallows of
time-gone-by.
Lift your chestnut-dark and heavy limbs, up from out the shipwreck’s
carnage,
and up through those long blue-green rolling waves.
Sing the wind’s songs, and collect what’s needed, drop by shivering
drop,
in this, your Lenten fasting, in this, your sorcerer’s midnight, under
this, the whip.
Leave the gallows, the sap of its cut-wood spits on your skin.
You’d hang there, yourself in effigy? No. Live sap runs in the driftwood
branch.
You’ll play, gentle, a light wind in the shimmering green of a
dancer’s beaded muslin skirt,
and your broken music will move in the foolish grass that still
believes in death—
leave your gallows-bones there, in the fool’s green shroud…
Scratch with the rusted nail of melody, because you live, wreckage
of my race,
the sky will not forget you, nor the graveyard’s earth, fertile and walled.
Your blood still dances, a wreckage of joy, joy soured, obstinate joy, wild and unbroken, shipwreck of my race, sarabande.
Poem

Handsome, like those foam-topped tidal waves breaking high,  
in little crystal globes.
Handsome, like the breeze that lifts a little tuft of tulle. If tulle were life.
Handsome, like a frozen face, tear-tracked, when the sun hammers down.
Handsome. Like fire.
Handsome, like the bottomless sky, with that one proud penetrating star.

But handsome, too, like a sky that’s an arching ocean, and an earth prone as an ocean’s floor.
Handsome ocean-sky, and earth-sea floor.  
The big question is: where’s the man in a scene like this?

Handsome: the man asleep. And the night sky swarms, tropic and wide.
Handsome, in some ornamental, muggy midnight caught between cat’s paws. Sharp-nailed:
they prick.
Handsome: the firefly swarms around you.
Handsome, like a soap bubble grazing a little black dress. Like a soap-bubble pricked with a pin.
Handsome, like shadows slow-rolling on a Japanese screen.
Handsome motion.
Handsome as life and poison.
Sun-blood handsome. Bleeding sun.

Translated from the French by Robert Archambeau
In 1941, his writings banned by the Vichy government and looking for any safe harbor, André Breton found himself in Martinique. Fine weather notwithstanding, he might almost have been at home in Paris: the place was buzzing with Surrealist activity. Aimé Césaire and his circle were just launching Tropiques, a literary review dedicated to Surrealism, Négritude, and anti-colonialism. Martiniquais Surrealism was primarily a game for men, despite Suzanne Césaire’s theoretical contributions to the journal. But the poetry of an almost completely unknown schoolteacher, Lucie Thésée, appeared in many issues of Tropiques, and eventually made its way into the larger Francophone world.

Despite the anthologizing of her work in various collections devoted to writing from the French colonies, and praise from the critic Léon Damas, we still know surprisingly little about Thésée. Certainly this has nothing to do with any shrinking-violet quality on her part: Thésée was a courageous woman, even to the point of recklessness. With Martinique under Vichy rule, Tropiques was singled out for persecution. The military government accused the journal of being “racial and sectarian,” a vehicle of hatred and division. A letter was sent back to the military officials, saying:

“Racists,” “sectarians,” “revolutionaries,” “ingrates and traitors to the country,” “poisoners of souls,” none of these epithets really repulses us.

“Poisoners of Souls,” like Racine,…

“Ingrates and traitors to our good Country,” like Zola,…

“Revolutionaries,” like the Hugo of “Châtiments.”

“Sectarians,” passionately, like Rimbaud and Lautréamont.

Racists, yes. Of the racism of Toussaint-Louverture, of Claude McKay and Langston Hughes against that of Drumont and Hitler.

As to the rest of it, don’t expect for us to plead our case, nor vain recriminations, nor discussion.

We do not speak the same language.
Lucie Thésée’s name appears beneath these courageous phrases, near Aimé Césaire.

Thésée’s poetry is incantatory, rich in images, subtly erotic, and almost never translated into English. Like all Surrealist writings, it poses special challenges, as the translator can’t always rely on context to determine the meaning of ambiguous phrases, and the atmospherics of the writing are at least as important as the denotative significance. I’ve played a little loose with denotation here, hoping to catch some of Thésée’s music and bring it with me into English. — RA
CLAUSE ESTEBAN

The Bend

Around the bend of a phrase
you return, it’s dawn in a book, it’s
a garden, one can
see everything, the dew, a moth
on a leaf and it’s you
who rises suddenly amid the pages
and the book grows more lovely
because it’s you
and you’ve not grown old, you walk
slowly to the door.
Someone, and no matter who, inhabits my head like it’s an empty house, he enters, he leaves, he bangs each door behind him, powerless I put up with this ruckus. Someone, and maybe it’s me, palms my most private thoughts, he crumples them, returns them to dust. Someone, and it’s much later now, slowly walks across the room and, not seeing me, stops to contemplate the havoc. Someone, and no matter where, collects the pieces of my shadow.

Translated from the French by Joanie Mackowski
Translator’s Note

Claude Esteban was raised speaking both French and Spanish; he spoke of this life between two languages as provoking a “dédoublement de la conscience,” or a splitting of consciousness. His poems convey a profound sense of longing, and they’re also much involved with a life in letters—the poems, even as they luxuriate in the materials of language, yearn for what (if anything) is beyond words. One of Esteban’s signature figures is anaphora, and it sounds in his poems like a sad echo, as if the poems were spoken in large empty rooms. I first came upon Esteban’s work in the usual way—I found a poem in an anthology and then went looking for more. He writes with extreme variety—not only did he translate and write essays in addition to writing poems, but his poems vary from prose poems to spare lyrics to rhymed sequences. To try to capture in English what “Someone, and no matter” conveys to my ear, I thought about the opening of Frost’s “Directive,” which to me conveys perhaps the most resonantly melancholy sound in English. “Directive” achieves this via its monosyllabic words arranged in a pentameter line, creating a line as even and austere as the ticking of a clock—and this is the measured austerity of “someone.” And of course the natural rhythm of the French language is syllabic, and not accentual-syllabic, like English—English is a language of mellow undulations and syncopations; French is, in comparison, straitened. In “Someone,” I altered some phrasing to approach an iambic rhythm and opted for monosyllabic words when I could (for instance, I’ve conveyed “j’assiste à,” which translates as “I witness,” as “I put up with”). Also, for “recouvre de poussière,” I opted for “return” rather than cover or recover, to reach toward an echo with “ashes to ashes.” “Around the bend of a phrase” is an ebullient line for Esteban—there’s a leaping excitement: the words are almost breaking through to something or someone palpable beyond them. But of course this breakthrough is revoked by the end of the poem. In this one, I opted to translate “papillon,” which normally is a butterfly, as a moth, mainly because butterfly is (I think) a goofy sounding word. —JM
From “Octonaires on the World’s Vanity and Inconstancy”

Ice glitters like it’s good.
The whole world glitters,
sped towards ends,
we all fall in.

Under the ice is water.
But under the world, between you
and the everything
of your vanishing …

Fire, air, water, and earth
still turning, spilling into each other.
He tuned the world tense,
made the elements restless

so any happiness we might contrive
of fire, or air, or water, or earth
cannot rest, has to reach higher
than earth, water, air, or fire.

It’s all echo — whatever world
keeps calling to you
in the woods, in a rock, a deep wave —
Just a lie that vanishes

as soon as it tricks you inside.
Shut up, go away, say to the world.
And it does — into the woods, a rock,
deep waves that keep calling you.
When the sky’s dark face
catches your eye again,
let memory write
of a darkness beyond this:

days self-blinded, nights
of searching untaught,
thinking your own thought,
light.

Wanting what you fear,
fearing your own desire:
icicles at the heart
form to burn apart.

When, in this cycle
of suffering he sings,
does the martyr begin
to suspect himself?

*Translated from the French by Nate Klug*
John Calvin and contemplative poetry?! The poet I loosely translate here, Antoine de Chandieu, studied under that famous Christian reformer in Geneva before returning to lead the growing Protestant movement in France. Chandieu churned out spiritual, theological, and polemical tracts into the cauldron of mid-sixteenth-century Europe, but he also wrote lyric poems throughout his life. The *Octonaires*, a series of fifty eight-line poems (many of which were set to devotional music still performed today), is the pick of the lot for me. In snatches, these *chansons* contain the pressurized mix of artistic inspiration and spiritual hesitation that characterizes a proud line within the Protestant aesthetic tradition. It’s a continuum that’s hard to commit to — the work is often full of stubborn ambivalence towards both art and spirit — but in English I see it stretching from George Herbert through Emily Dickinson and up to Jack Spicer and Basil Bunting.

Chandieu’s *Octonaires* anticipate the finest elements of this line without actually achieving them. Nonetheless, these octets use formal surprise to express the vocational uncertainty the churchman must have felt toward the end of his life, after St. Bartholomew’s Day, 1572, when French Catholics killed thousands of French Protestants and damaged the new ecclesiastical foundation Chandieu had labored for. In the original *Octonaires*, written in the decade following that massacre, there is a shaky audacity to the statements on politics and religion. It’s the wounded boldness of human language seeking to conform to a divine Word that seems sometimes to have fallen silent itself.

In *A Gathered Church*, Donald Davie sketches a Calvinist aesthetic: “sensual pleasure deployed with an unusually frugal, and therefore exquisite, fastidiousness.” As I made these *Octonaires* into poems in English, I took liberties in striving for a further frugality: my concern was to bring both the desire and the bitterness of Chandieu’s voice into a contemporary idiom. The paradox in the act of poetic translation — altering language and spirit in the attempt to preserve them — seems entirely in line with the reformed religious practices for which Chandieu risked his life. — NK
Last Simile

It’s as if she were an earn, gebidende prey for her eyrie.

Perched alertly, a hægtesse on their innards.

In bitter morgenceald, her hoar-glittered feathers.

Suddenly she sees a fox on the westene.

At that she rouses, heaved up on high, and heads straight at him, in harrowing hæste.

Hearing her, he freezes his tail. He’s terrified.

Sees, bestelð, with ēagan flashing, talons overtake him, dash him down in torment, overtake him again, swenged him on the eordan.

One yelp as she pincers his liver. Wyrd — pierces aorta.

Translated from the Arabic by Ange Mlinko
Lament

We wither, unlike stars; die, unlike hills and cisterns.

*Ana* shadowed my protector, esteemed Arbad, who’s left us.

But *ana* do not grieve; all sparrows exit the feast hall.

Novelties don’t excite me, nor *wyrdstaef* affright me.

Men are like encampments that soon become ruins.

They come with their kin, leave only land behind when they go —

the last herdsman rounding up the stragglers.

Man’s a shooting star: light turned to ash.

Wealth and kin a stain that soon wears away.

The work we do inevitably *gehrorene*.

The wise grasp this; the foolish fight it and lose.

If my *wyrd* holds off a while, my fingers reach out for its stick.

*Ana* can tell you stories, bent over the more *ana* try to straighten.

*Ana* am like a battered sword that hasn’t gotten any less sharp.

Don’t leave me! (The sparrow finds the exit suddenly —.)

O you reproachful *wiscynn*: when the men go off

Can your witchcraft tell us who’ll return?
Do you faint because they *flet osgeafon*?

You make everyone weep! for the *burston* bodies

of the irreplaceable friends of your own youth.

But neither the witches nor the necromancers know

what the *aelmihtig* intends. Just ask them:

*Hwêr côm* the men? *Hwêr côm* our protectors?

They don’t even know when the rain storm will come!

*Translated from the Arabic by Ange Mlinko*
Translators Note

The idea came to me last year when I was in Beirut, reading as much scholarship on Jahiliyya (pre-Islamic) poetry as I could find in English: aren’t there some uncanny similarities between, say, sixth-century qasidas and tenth-century Anglo-Saxon poems like “The Wanderer” or “The Seafarer” or even parts of Beowulf? Concreteness and compression of language. Journeys across darkened wastes. Desolation and violence. Wolves and birds of prey. Celebration of the tribe, and the joys of the feast. Fatalism: what in Arabic is known as mekhtoub (What is written) and in Anglo-Saxon wyrd (“weird” — but close enough to “word” to be, well, weird). Even the arrangement of hemistichs on the page recalls the caesuraed lines of Anglo-Saxon verse. I thought that if I could live with both worlds for a while, a hunch would turn into an essay. Instead, I invented a translation strategy that traced one sensibility over the other.

1) “Last Simile” is the concluding passage of Abid b. al-Abras’s qasida, “Aqfara min ahli-hi Malhub.” It is one of the original Seven Odes of the Mu’allaqât.

2) Labid’s “Lament” (translated in its entirety) is called the “Ritha’ Arbad” in Arabic, and signals the emergence of a new form on the cusp of Islam: the elegy, with its emphasis on the individual (Labid’s brother-in-law, Arbad) rather than on ritualized mourning. The legend surrounding Labid claims that he converted to Islam and ceased to write poetry. For that reason, I felt justified incorporating the religious elements that one finds in Christianized Anglo-Saxon poetry: Bede’s swallow; the Almighty. The gulf between the merciless natural world and the hope offered by faith is stark in each case.

Both translations correspond line by line to their original hemistichs (based on an annotated translation by Alan Jones: Early Arabic Poetry) except at the end of “Lament,” where there was simply too much information packed in, and I (reluctantly) had to expand the line count once or twice. “Hwær cōm” alludes to the anguished cry in “The Wanderer,” kin to the Latin “Ubi sunt.”

By incorporating some obsolete Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, I was able to enhance the alliterative and assonantal qualities — and the
sheer strangeness — of the translation. My favorite discovery is that *ana*, the Arabic for “I,” resembles the Anglo-Saxon word for “alone” (the difference is that its first *a* is long, while the Arabic pronunciation has two short *a*’s). Thus I translate “ana” for “I” or “I alone” and get two languages for the price of one morpheme. In my other favorite discovery, the word for earth, *eordē*, is almost homonymous with aorta. (Grammar dictated I use the dative, *eordan*.) I admit I liked these foreign words as semantic indigestibles. Like poems in dialect, they heighten the music, and delay the meaning. But only until you get to the crib.

My stabs at Anglo-Saxon were vetted by my colleague, John McNamara. My gratitude goes out to him, as well as to David Mikics, who pointed me toward David Curzon, who wrote that “the English poetic closest to the Hebrew of the Psalms is the old Anglo-Saxon alliterative metre.” Curzon’s wonderful translations of the psalms into strong-stress, alliterative verse reassured me that I’m not alone in seeing correspondences between Semitic desert and northern seafaring poetries. — AM

“Last Simile”: *earn* (eagle); *gebidente* (waiting for); *hægtesse* (witch); *morgenceald* (morning chill); *westene* (desert, wasteland); *hæste* (violence); *besteld* (stealing [along the ground]); *ēagan* (eyes); *swengeð* (strike); *eordan* (earth); *wyrd* (fate)

“Lament”: *ana* (I [Arabic], alone [Anglo-Saxon]); *wyrdstaef* (things decreed by fate); *gehrorene* (decay); *wifcynn* (womenfolk); *flet ofgeāfōn* (die, fly away); *burston* (broken); *aelmihtig* (Almighty, God); *hwār cōm?* (where gone?)
A blind man was riding an unheated train
From Bryansk he was traveling home with his fate.

Fate whispered to him so the whole car could hear:
And why should you care about blindness and war?

It’s good, she was saying, you’re sightless and poor.
If you were not blind, you’d never survive.

The Germans won’t kill you, you’re nothing to them.
Allow me to lift that bag on your shoulder—

The one with the holes, the empty torn one.
Let me just raise your eyelids wide open.

The blind man was traveling home with his fate,
Now thankful for blindness. Happy about it.

Written in a cargo train, between Bryansk and Zhivodovka, 1943
To Poems

My poems: fledglings, heirs,
Plaintiffs and executors,
The silent ones, the loud,
The humble and the proud.

As soon as the shovel of time
Threw me onto the potter’s wheel —
Myself without kith or kin —
I grew beneath the hand, a miracle.

Something stretched out my long neck
And hollowed round my soul
And marked on my back
Legends of flowers and leaves.

I stoked the birch in the fire
As Daniel commanded
And blessed my red temper
Until I spoke as a prophet.

I had long been the earth —
Arid, ochre, forlorn since birth —
But you fell on my chest by chance
From beaks of birds, from eyes of grass.

Translated from the Russian by Philip Metres & Dimitri Purtsev
Translator’s Note

Perhaps all translations are Frankenstein’s monsters. The main question then becomes: is the creature alive? We know that translations, like the monster, are a grab bag of other organs and skin, stolen from the graveyards of other traditions whose sensibilities are not always our own, grafted together into something that approximates a whole. But has the translator provided the lightning rod, gathered the electricity? In the end, does it breathe?

Tarkovsky’s poetry exemplifies the richness of Russian poetry, driven as it is by its music, propelled by a stunning diversity of meters and rhyme schemes; our translation, we determined, should make every attempt for a parallel (if not exactly corresponding) music. For example, in his war-era portrait “A blind man was riding. . . ,” Tarkovsky employs a dactylic trimeter (plus a final beat) in couplets that echo Nikolay Nekrasov’s jaunty folk song meters, creating a dissonant effect with the grim picture of a blind man in a cargo train during the Nazi invasion. Almost accidentally, I began to hear the poem as amphibrachs, an unusual three-part foot (unstressed-stressed-unstressed), and then worked to maintain that dance nearly to the end. Without a rhythm and rhyme, we would risk turning Tarkovsky into a standard Socialist Realist—losing that suture of sound and vision that makes his poetry lasting. (I have taken just a couple of liberties with meaning, but mainly as a way to keep the spell from breaking.)

In “To Poems,” Tarkovsky’s characteristic Christian pantheism rises to the surface of the poem, like sudden green in spring. The final lines presented a problem that thankfully was clarified by F.D. Reeve, who noted that the “eyes of grass” is a reference to how fields of grasses would contain wildflowers, whose “eyes” would seed the earth. In what is an all-too-typical problem in translation, what appeared to be pure abyssal surrealism—“eyes of grass”—was an associative leap from one place to another place, very much on (and in) earth. How stunning that a poet of such great humility (from humus, earth) is, in that final stanza, able to pull off speaking as earth. —PM
Children grow in secret. They hide themselves in the depths and
darker reaches of the house to become wild cats, white birches.

One day when you’re only half-watching the herd as it straggles
back in with the afternoon dust, one child, the prettiest of them all,
comes close and rises up on tiptoe to whisper *I love you, I’ll be waiting
for you in the hay.*

Shaking some, you go to find your shotgun; you spend what’s left
of the day firing at rooks and jackdaws, uncountable at this hour, and
crows.
Goats

Wherever the earth is crag and scrub, the goats are there — the black ones, girlishly skipping, leaping their little leaps from rock to rock. I’ve loved their nerve and frisk since I was small.

Once my grandfather gave me one of my own. He showed me how I could serve myself when I got hungry, from the full-feeling bags there like warmish wineskins, where I’d let my hands linger some before bringing my mouth close, so the milk wouldn’t go to waste on my face, my neck, even my naked chest, which did happen sometimes, who knows if on purpose, my mind dwelling all the while on the savory-smelling vulvazinha. I called her Maltesa; she was my horse; I could almost say she was my first woman.

Translated from the Portuguese by Atsuro Riley
I love the natural-order appetitive forthrightness of “As Cabras” (“Goats”) and have reached for that here; I’ve also tried to make my English version as aurally interstitched and orally satisfying as the Portuguese original.

One textual note: zinha is the kind of wonderfully economical polychord diminutive we ought to have in English. So softly does it naturalize-domesticate in this poem by its tone-colors of fondness, familiarity, playfulness, endearment, I’ve left it there untranslated to do its work.

Eugénio de Andrade is one of Portugal’s most beloved writers, the kind of poet a Lisbon taxi-man will want to recite to you, mellifluously, once he’s run through his Pessoa, after he’s finished up his Camões—

Creio que foi o sorriso
o sorriso foi quem abriu a porta.
Era um sorriso com muita luz
lá dentro, apetecia
entrar nele, tirar a roupa, ficar
nu dentro daquele sorriso.
Correr, navegar, morrer naquele sorriso.
— O Sorriso
You who please your keenness with poems, read closely here: can you discover this verse’s framer? \gammadion finishes. Nobles enjoy it on earth, but not without end, worldly ones. \paw must fail \kappa in our strongholds once our bodies scatter their loaned treasure, like \gamma trickling through fingers. Then \kappa and ear require \kappa skill in night’s narrow cell; \delta drives your craft, a kingly servitude. Now can you see who shrewd words have shown to men? Remember my name, O you who admire the sound of this song; help succor me and pray for my comfort. Soon I must pass alone, away to look for a dwelling, must travel so far (no telling where!) beyond this world to a yet-unknown place in the earth. So must each person, unless he is granted God-sent grace. Let us call to God again, more eager, begging his blessing in this bright creation: may we be welcomed to his warm halls, his home on high. There is holiest happiness, there the king of angels crowns the pure with a perishless prize. Now his praise endures masterful and marvelous, and his might extends endless and ageless over all creation. FINIT.

Translated from the Anglo Saxon and Futhork runes by Robert Hasenfratz & V. Penelope Pelizzon

\gammadion (fortune); \paw (winning); \kappa (us); \gamma (lakewater); \kappa (candle); \kappa (your); \delta (need)
Little is known of the Anglo-Saxon poet who, sometime before the tenth century, inserted runes into his verse as an acrostic signature. Cynewulf—or Cynwulf, as these runes spell out when reordered—was once thought to have composed works including the Exeter Book riddles, Andreas, and Dream of the Rood. Scholars are now willing to assign him authorship of only the four extant poems that bear some version of his name. Fates of the Apostles, to which this signature is attached, is part of a tenth-century codex rediscovered in 1822 in the library of the cathedral in Vercelli, Italy.

Beyond the runic name, what do we know? The poet’s familiarity with Latin hagiography suggests that he was a monk or priest. Some scholars argue that textual accents indicate his poems were composed in Mercian dialect. His spelling is consistent with ninth-century practice. The rest is lost.

Perhaps this is appropriate; when Cynewulf here claims authorship of a poem about apostolic martyrdom, he steps forward by hiding. For those who could read his Futhork or runic alphabet, each character stood in for both a letter and a word. Arguably, each rune also invited symbolic or homophonic associations. Five of the seven runes Cynewulf signs with have been interpreted more or less consistently. Through them, he seems to give us a universal moral: worldly pleasures vanish as easily as water.

Yet the riddling density of the runes increases. Several lines in the Vercelli book are blotted to near-illegibility. Scholars agree that the damaged signs are \( C\) (Cēn) and \( Y\) (Yr), standing for \( c\) and \( y\). But what words do they indicate? \( C\) might signify torch, fire, ulcer, or warrior. And \( Y\): a yew bow? An inkhorn? A homophonic pun for “afflicted wretch”? No matter, the passage is obscure.

Though the runic signature poses a didactic Christian message, it does not seem far-fetched to imagine Cynewulf tucking a small self portrait into his name. Our translation takes up the fire imagery of \( C\) and the homophonic invitation of \( Y\) to suggest a monk meditating on the skill needed to compose and scribe poem-prayers during the long dark Mercian nights. — RH & VPP
For my little ballads,
those strange, sunset-red laments,
spring paid me a gull’s egg.

I bade my lover paint my portrait
    on its thick shell.
He painted a new bulb in brown soil —
on the other side, a powdery mound of sand.
Animalistic Hymn

The red sun rises
without intent
and shines the same on all of us.
We play like children under the sun.
One day, our ashes will scatter —
   it doesn’t matter when.
Now the sun finds our innermost hearts,
   fills us with oblivion
intense as the forest, winter and sea.

Translated from the Swedish by Brooklyn Copeland
Translator’s Note

I first translated Edith Södergran in Finland, ten years ago. In the guest room where I stayed there were three books by the bed—one by J.K. Rowling, one by Richard P. Feynman, and one by the poet. I opted for the poetry, which happened to be in Swedish.

I’ve spent many hours since then with Södergran’s books cracked open over one knee and my Swedish-English dictionary cracked open over the other. I’ve kept track of my progress in the same little journal I had in that guest room. In Swedish, I’ve found the straightforwardness that I’ve moved towards in my own work. The language is gorgeously balanced and at ease with itself. Its sounds and appearance on the page encompass both the sunny and the snowy. The hot and the cold. The red and the white. The rustic and the modern. The elegant and the sturdy.

My conversational Swedish has deteriorated drastically in the past ten years, not that it was ever remarkable when I had the chance to make it so. As with other languages, I do much better reading the words than saying them. That’s why I’m happy to share a few of my translations. It’s crucial for poets to read outside their own language, whatever their academic background—to sit for hours with a book of poems on one knee and a dictionary on the other. I would argue that a poet who has never translated a poem is going to write uninformed poetry. The translated poet, even if deceased, will be the toughest and most appreciative critic you’ll ever have.

Södergran sits on my shelf in a group of female poets bookended by H.D. and Edna St. Vincent Millay. More poets belong here than I have access to, but I’m hopeful this will change. As for Södergran, in the few older translations available, the (very competent) translators seem to push her more towards the traditional, despite calling her a Modernist—this has always confused me. I’ve enjoyed defining my own preferences in the same poems. My translations are not radical, but they do seek to animate, rather than patronize, the youthful, self-certain character I read in Södergran’s work. — BC
A Gray Day

I spoke in a hurry, in a nervous hush,
Because the time was short—
The lightning was shuddering,
Slowing down, running.

Or was that my blood,
The quiet diminishing of daily life?
It's time for me to go forth
Into Your tiny mustard seed.

In the house of my Father, everything is fading,
In the house of the Father, all the angels are crying,
Because the anguish of a jaded, exhausted horse
Sometimes finds its way even unto them.

One gray day, I was alive on this earth,
And amid the mist of day— in triumph—
The Spirit may approach and look
So that you will see Him, without seeing.

And, so, celebrate the meager light,
Curse not the twilight.
If Christ is to visit us
It will be on such pitiful days as these.
I was thinking: God has abandoned me,
So, what of it — he is a priceless ray of light,
Or a thin needle in the haystack of man. And cruel.
I have turned away from him — torment me no more.
But which of us is more cruel? More to be feared?
The one who has no body, of course.
He has made us endless, vast —
So that our grief will know no bounds.

_Provvidence, 2001_

_Translated from the Russian by Stephanie Sandler_
Elena Shvarts may have been the most remarkable Russian poet of her generation. A few years younger than Joseph Brodsky, she was more prolific, with a ferocious will to live and to create. She had his deep internalization of Russia’s huge poetic inheritance, as well as his improbable inner freedom. She moved among traditional forms and styles fearlessly, and she invented her own rhythms (Shvarts is best known among Russian poets for her unerring ability to mix rhythms in a single poem). Unusual for poets of her era, she could write with ease about God, about faith and failures of faith; that encounter with the divine is felt in both poems printed here. She felt the greatest affinity for Dostoyevsky, and in her poetry one finds the equivalent of his outsized personalities, as well as his sense of history, destiny, and the challenge of belief. She had Dostoyevsky’s appetite for putting all of human experience, its beauty as well as its ugliness, into language.

Shvarts seemed compelled to write of a poet’s place in the cosmos, yet many of her poems were small. The brevity can be extreme, as in “I was thinking: God has abandoned me.” This poem first appeared in a volume whose Russian title means “Wild writing of the recent past” (Dikopis’ poslednego vremeni, 2001), and it was dedicated to the memory of the poet’s mother, Dina Shvarts. Because of that dedication, the word toska, in the final line, is translated as “grief,” although it can also mean longing, or anguish. “A Gray Day” is a poem from Pesnia ptitsy na dne morskom (Birdsong on the Seabed, 1995). Birdsong on the Seabed is also the title of a volume of excellent translations by Sasha Dugdale, published by Bloodaxe in 2008. Shvarts loved improbable collocations, like birds calling out from the ocean’s deep, and so her beloved Leningrad/St. Petersburg was ever imperial and historic, degraded and Soviet. In her work, it is reborn as a city of stone and debris, of flowing rivers and gardens gone wild. She died in St. Petersburg of cancer, in March, 2010. — ss
September is a month like any other and unlike any other. It seems in September everything awaited will arrive: in the calm air, in a particular scent, in the stillness of the quay. When September comes, I know I’m going to lose myself. The ants climbing my legs and a certain change of light tell me so. The air comes and goes beneath my dress, pressing the warm cloth against me, pressing me with the desire to find myself in the sea, that sea beaten deep gray and magnetized by neutrinos, thanks to which I can perform my observations and telekinetic communications. The salty, sticky wall of the Malecón is covered with fish and forgotten hooks. I like to lick its sheen of salt and make my tongue salty and sticky. In that moment the rest of the city can vanish, it’s just that sea and me, before all thought, all desire. Then I undress and enter, knowing I’ll find something, and that the boats—which seem suspended on the horizon, seem to have slipped their limits, motionless and painted there—are also mine... When I met you and you met me it was still September and we were strange and different and would be for a long time after—though I sometimes snagged you with certain secret hooks, shaping a sort of formless impression: something strange and indefinable divided the outline of your body from the space around you, but without making a human form, and in your eyes the sunlight revolved like a bicycle’s spoked wheel... The bicycle moves on and I’m carried along, filled with dry branches and coral. In my hair I wear the butterflies we collected together. The little house, one point amid the infinite, comes into view: already we can see the windows, like little black voids, and their curtains beating in the wind. I squeeze your waist, the bicycle moves on; even though the street is narrow the bicycle rolls on, rolls against the spray. When you turn your head and see my hand, my hook snagged in a struggle of desire, the sun has turned immense in your eyes again. You make for the little house already in view, already at the edge of the curve... a naked man in lamplight is a magnificent animal: his pointy shoulders jut out and cut off the light. A line of fuzz descends from his navel to where the darkness begins, where the skin tightens like the skin of a fig. His body—your body—is an arc I want to tighten, to overcome, to conquer. Hidden behind a tree, I can see...
your eyes again. the Mississippi is a big river with many tributaries. the arc tightens and closes. i throw an arm over you, a leg, a hand, a lip, hallucinations, an ear — as usual. my body moves on. the Mississippi is a big river with many tributaries. its water burns in my thighs, in the course of my dreams: the Mississippi is a deep and torrential river situated in the United States, it is born in Lake Itasca, passes through St. Paul, St. Louis, Memphis, New Orleans, traverses 3,780 kilometers and slides and slides through a wide delta to the Gulf of Mexico.
i’m in geography class. i like this class. the world just barely fits in my head. the map hangs before me with its spokes and points. someone made that all up, just to make me think i belong to one of those zones out there. all those castles and fortifications to toy with, the beginnings of everything that seems to be reality, but isn’t, because we’re not outside but inside the globe, that huge globe so stubborn in its sufficiency, and even far from the classroom nothing’s different: there’s just the idea of that transparent globe that is my image of the world, always turning, imperfect and constant inside me. i like the maps and the instability of the geography that situates places in my head. i like using graph paper to plot the latitudes and longitudes i can’t measure. i also like the geography professor, whose eyes i must constantly avoid in order not to drown myself. he doesn’t know, he can’t imagine, that while he lectures, while he looks at me, i draw fish in my notebook to throw in his river. the boy behind me won’t stop looking at me, and whatever one does the others all follow, watching from the corners of their eyes. that’s why i’m going to fold the page away from his gaze and make a true map where he won’t find me, alone at my desk in the middle of the world … in the middle of the lake there’s a boat and we’re three — although the third may have already vanished for us — and i want to paddle and sit in the center. you’ve taken off your shirt: the landscape appears and disappears. when i take the oars you want to teach me how to row over the edge. you try to teach me: you take my hands — you’re behind and above me. my fingers are lost in the middle of the boat. i’m wearing faded jeans and carrying a purple parasol. the oar descends toward the deep and tangles with seaweed. my hair hangs surly and limp on my wet shoulders. we try to steer but
go nowhere. you explain the roundness of the earth; the sharpened
tip of the compass needle, always precise, marking contours, lines,
limits. the shadow and truth of your body in the landscape: appear-
ances and disappearances when you try to comprehend the possible
across great distances, the symmetry, forgetfulness, incarnation in
other beings: animals, plants, and later, men once again. you taught
me all this, but i’m not a map and i hold still. i abandon my shoes and
my dread of nearing the end: the oar descends toward the deep, it is
september. we don’t move. i keep still to be different, that’s why…
we went into a market — they call it a grocery — and you can’t imagine. fruit brilliant as magazine photos. all kinds of different oranges, grapefruits, mandarins, some tiny clementines with a blue sticker — Morocco — they’ve come so far… the eggs are painted with colors corresponding to the days of the week you’re supposed to eat them: a different color for each opportunity. i felt dizzy, the gulf between myself and this place seemed insuperable. tears welled up in my eyes, i wanted desperately to flee, to get outside so i could breathe. i wanted to explain to Phillis, the North American who had invited me, what was happening to me. i tried, but she couldn’t understand: you have to have felt it yourself; the first time. for the first time my mind had crossed over five hundred years of development at jet speed and arrived in the future, a cold future, its display cases filled with artificial snow and artificial heat. there were a thousand things i never knew existed, a panoply of brand names and gadgets for every purpose. i felt like someone from the stone age, and realized most people on the planet never know the era they’re living in, any more than they could know the quantity of living matter in this galaxy that surrounds us, or the milky complexity of the molecules in their own brains, and what’s more they don’t know that they’ll die without ever knowing. i felt terror of that gloss, of the waxed fruit, of propaganda so refined it could dilute the existence of the strange things before my eyes, other sensations: everything wanting to be used up, immediately, licked, tasted, eaten, packaged, mastered. i knew i couldn’t stand this avalanche, this brilliant swarm, for long, these rows on rows of distant faces staring out at me from cardboard boxes. i’d seen nothing singular in the place, no unique thing i could separate out from the amorphous mass of texture and sensation. i began to move closer, imagining i walked with those who have never eaten meat or tasted cow’s milk, who have never nursed except from the teat of a goat. those who have had only wildflowers to chew when the winter hunger comes. i approached closer still, imagining i walked with the salty ones, who collect their water from the public pipe. my nose began to bleed and Phillis said it was the cold; i knew that wasn’t the problem. we were near the seafood display, i moved closer. fish have always
aroused in me both horror and desire. I moved closer, like a lost child feeling her way through space toward something of hers that’s hidden. I brushed the shells with my fingertips, they were smooth and delicate, but obviously artificial, made to be used once and thrown away. At first touch they might seem real, pearly, perfect, but they’re actually plastic, and they’ve never even seen any sea.

Translated from the Spanish by Joel Brouwer & Jessica Stephenson
These selections are from Travelling, a book of thirty-five prose paragraphs by contemporary Cuban poet Reina María Rodríguez. Over the course of this collection, Rodríguez undertakes travels both literal and figurative; most often, as in these two selections, the distinction between physical and imagined travel is blurred to the point of irrelevance. Rodríguez describes Travelling’s first-person speaker as one “who moves among places, people, situations, never experiencing them as real, but rather as elements in a script, or objects in a gallery.” Citing the influence of Roland Barthes, Rodríguez tells us she hopes the individual sections of Travelling, like those of Barthes’s Mythologies, are both viable as independent fragments and united by a common effect and tone. The collection’s episodes remind us as well of W.G. Sebald’s novels in their hypnotic oscillations between haziness and clarity, memory and oblivion, candor and evasion, histories personal and public.

Rodríguez composed Travelling in the mid-eighties. She wanted to include photographs in the text, which proved a challenge, as there were few places to have film developed in Cuba at the time. Finally a doctor friend managed to develop the pictures at a hospital, and the manuscript was ready to be printed. By that time, though, Cuba’s so-called “special period” had begun, an era of extreme deprivation brought about by the loss of Soviet patronage, and there was no paper to print the book. Finally, in 1995, the Mexican group Un Libro para Cuba, dedicated to aiding print culture in Cuba “en solidaridad con la lucha del pueblo cubano contra el bloqueo norteamericano,” arranged to have Travelling printed in Mexico City in an edition of twelve hundred. Rodríguez was pregnant with her daughter when she finished Travelling; she didn’t see it printed until after her daughter’s seventh birthday.

As often happens when poets write prose, questions about Travelling’s genre are inevitable but likely immaterial. The book’s title page identifies it as a “relato novelado” — a fictionalized account, or a memoir — but Rodríguez tells us this was the publisher’s choice of terms, not her own. Rodríguez says flatly that she does not like the term “prosa poética.” “Para mí,” she writes, Travelling “es prosa.”
Indeed it is, but with due respect to the author, we think it’s also poetry.

Daniel Borzutzky, writing recently on poetryfoundation.org about Cuban poet Omar Pérez, rightly suggests that when Americans approach Cuban poetry, they inevitably become entangled in thickets of history, mythology, and fantasy. We lack both the space and the expertise to navigate those brambles here, and instead refer the reader to Borzutzky’s fine article, Mark Weiss’s *The Whole Island: Six Decades of Cuban Poetry*, and to the work of Kristin Dykstra. Dykstra has produced excellent translations of Rodríguez (as well as Pérez), and written extensively about Cuban poetry with great intelligence and sensitivity. It was she who introduced us both to Rodríguez’s work and to Rodríguez, and she has been unfailingly helpful to us in our struggle to render *Travelling* in English. Our debt to her is second only to our debt to Rodríguez herself. —JB & JS
Hollywood Elegies

1
Under the long green hair of pepper trees,
The writers and composers work the street.
Bach’s new score is crumpled in his pocket,
Dante sways his ass-cheeks to the beat.

2
The city is named for the angels,
And its angels are easy to find.
They give off a lubricant odor,
Their eyes are mascara-lined;
At night you can see them inserting
Gold-plated diaphragms;
For breakfast they gather at poolside
Where screenwriters feed and swim.

3
Every day, I go to earn my bread
In the exchange where lies are marketed,
Hoping my own lies will attract a bid.

4
It’s Hell, it’s Heaven: the amount you earn
Determines if you play the harp or burn.

5
Gold in their mountains,
Oil on their coast;
Dreaming in celluloid
Profits them most.
On the Term of Exile

No need to drive a nail into the wall
To hang your hat on;
When you come in, just drop it on the chair
No guest has sat on.

Don’t worry about watering the flowers —
In fact, don’t plant them.
You will have gone back home before they bloom,
And who will want them?

If mastering the language is too hard,
Only be patient;
The telegram imploring your return
Won’t need translation.

Remember, when the ceiling sheds itself
In flakes of plaster,
The wall that keeps you out is crumbling too,
As fast or faster.

Translated from the German by Adam Kirsch
Translator’s Note

Because I was born and raised in Los Angeles, I’ve always been fascinated by the stories of the German writers and composers who took shelter there during the Nazi period. If you grow up in L.A., it doesn’t take long to figure out that history is something that takes place elsewhere. That’s why the idea of Thomas Mann in Pacific Palisades or Bertolt Brecht in Santa Monica, places I knew as a child, is so powerfully strange. These artists came at the end of an infinitely complex, self-conscious, and tragic cultural tradition. Yet they were living in a place that was (and maybe still is) synonymous with democratic opportunity and natural benevolence—the very qualities that drew my own grandparents to Southern California, from Brooklyn, during the WWII years.

I first encountered these poems by Brecht as the texts of songs by Hanns Eisler, a German composer who was exiled from Nazi Germany on account of his Communist politics, and spent the war years composing music for Hollywood films. At the same time, he wrote more than two hundred lieder, including many settings of Brecht, who also fled Germany in 1933 and ended up in Los Angeles in 1941. Brecht and Eisler had been friends and collaborators in Weimar Germany, and they worked together on one film, Hangmen Also Die. But the so-called “Hollywood Songbook” expresses—in Eisler’s tense, largely atonal music as in Brecht’s verse—their feelings of despair and alienation in the midst of California’s peace and abundance.

The first five poems I’ve translated are from the group Brecht called “Hollywood Elegies” and were written in Southern California. The sixth, “On the Term of Exile,” was written after Brecht left Germany but before he came to America. My versions or imitations try to capture the ideas and mood of the originals, while extrapolating somewhat from Brecht’s imagery (though the most obscene images—Dante’s shriveled ass, the golden diaphragms—are in the original). I’ve also recast Brecht’s free verse into meter and rhyme, hoping in this way to accentuate what strikes me most about the movement of the poems—it’s ironic, epigrammatic curtness. —AK
Maybe my soul is straight and good,
but she’s got to lug my heart, my blood,
which all hurts because it’s crooked;
its weight sends her staggering.
She has no bed, she has no home,
she merely hangs on my sharp bones,
flapping her terrible wings.

And my hands are completely shot,
shriveled, worn: here, take a look
at how they clammily, clumsily hop
like rain-crazed toads.
As for all the other stuff,
it’s all used up and sad and old —
why doesn’t God haul me out to the muck
and let me drop.

Is it because of my mug
with its frowning mouth?
So often I would itch
to be luminous and free of fog
but nothing would approach
except big dogs.
And the dogs got zilch.

Translated from the German by Lucia Perillo
Translator’s Note

Among Rainer Maria Rilke’s early work (that is, pre-Duino Elegies and Sonnets to Orpheus) is a cycle of songs—collectively titled “The Voices”—that are attributed to society’s outcasts: lepers, blind men, idiots. I’ve always had affection for these poems, though they do not carry as much intellectual baggage as his later work. My being drawn to them probably springs from my sympathy for these characters as outsiders. I have a hunch that most people would place themselves among society’s freaks (as opposed to the well-adjusted). In response to these characters we say: Go team.

My poem is more properly a version, rather than a felicitous translation (I don’t speak a lick of German except what I learned from watching Hogan’s Heroes). What I wanted to do is bring out the song-nature of the poem, and the wounded plain-spokenness of its speaker (though these may be delusions of mine), and so my decisions were made on the side of rhyme, meter, and forthrightness of locution. An obvious problem “The Voices” presents is how to preserve the strict rhymes of the originals, and in my earlier versions I ended up drifting into “heigh-ho heigh-ho” territory. In the end, I sacrificed literal precision for the sonic whole that I was after.

Rilke’s original concludes with a maddening degree of ambiguity, which means that a translator either preserves it, or picks her poison and chugs, by making a decision about what exactly the dogs don’t have. I’ve kept some of the mystery of the ending, while concluding with a word that I think is very much in keeping with what I imagine is the lexicon of dwarves (again, a delusion). I’ve also taken the liberty of giving the poem a few of my own clarifications that aren’t validated by the original, though I’m still up in the air about those big dogs.

Sonia and Rita Wiedenhaupt enabled me to tease my way through the poem, and I am indebted to their enthusiasm for my project. —L.P.
FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA

The Unfaithful Housewife

For Mary Peace

Then I led her to the river
certain she was still a virgin
though she had a husband.
The fourth Friday in July,
as good as on a promise.
The street lights were vanishing
and the crickets flaring up.
Last bend out of town
I brushed her sleepy breasts.
They blossomed of a sudden
like the tips of hyacinths
and the starch of her petticoat
bustled in my ear like silk
slit by a dozen blades.
The pines, minus their halo
of silver, grew huger
and the horizon of dogs
howled a long way from the river.

Past the blackberry bushes,
the rushes and whitethorn,
beneath her thatch of hair,
I made a dip in the sand.
I took off my neckerchief.
She unstrapped her dress.
Me my gun and holster,
she her layers of slips…
Not tuberose, not shell,
has skin as half as smooth
nor does mirror glass
have half the shimmer.
Her hips flitted from me
like a pair of startled tench:
the one full of fire,  
the other full of cold.  
That night I might  
as well have ridden  
the pick of the roads  
on a mother-of-pearl mare  
without bridle or stirrups.  
Gentleman that I am,  
I won’t say back the scraps  
she whispered to me.  
It dawned out there  
to leave my lip bitten.  
Filthy with soil and kisses,  
I led her from the river  
and the spears of lilies  
battled in the air.

I behaved only the way  
a blackguard like me behaves.  
I offered her a big creel  
of hay-colored satins.  
I had no wish to fall for her.  
She has a husband after all,  
though she was still a virgin  
when I led her to the river.

Translated from the Spanish by Conor O’Callaghan
Sometimes you read a literal prose translation of a celebrated poem in a language you don’t have. It’s like viewing a landscape by an old master through frosted glass: you can make out enough of the outline to see that it’s gorgeous, but all the details are obfuscated. This is definitely true of J.L. Gili’s English rendering of the most infamous poem of Lorca’s most famous collection, Romancero gitano (Gypsy Ballads). I came across it in the summer of 2008, in my old Penguin edition on my mother’s shelves. I was en route to my kid brother’s remote semi-derelict cottage, having written nothing in almost a year. I was in a bad way, kind of on the run.

The one other version out there that I liked was Leonard Cohen’s “The Faithless Wife,” which has a song setting by Philip Glass in the Book of Longing cycle. The Cohen is even more a ballad than the original, but increasingly I could see that he had shortcircuited lots of detail to get his lovely rhythm: “Then I took off my necktie/And she took off her dress/My belt and pistol set aside/We tore away the rest.”

So mine happened between two competing versions. This is probably true of all poems, and not just translations. You’re trying to actualize your own silent invisible ideal that seems to exist in the white space between others’ extant versions of that ideal. I used Gili’s gloss to navigate back through the Spanish. Half of it was mine before I knew I didn’t want to do it, or shouldn’t.

Maybe the immediate familiarity I felt with the poem was no coincidence. Michael Hartnett had translated Gypsy Ballads before me, and with success. Lorca’s biographer, Ian Gibson, is from Dublin. There are clear twentieth-century parallels between Ireland and Spain: civil war; decades of Catholic fundamentalism and institutional fear; two longstanding repressive leaders, Franco and de Valera, who died within months of one another in 1975. My Lorca has “blackberry bushes,/rushes and whitethorn,” the pure stuff of Irish summer. “Su mata de pelo” becomes “her thatch of hair,” and “el mejor de los caminos” is “the pick of the roads.” And so on.

The lines of the original that cost me most sleep were: “La luz del entendimiento/me hace ser muy comedido.” I can only trust the quality of the original. But Gili’s literal rendering had no purchase
in English for me: “The light of understanding/has made me most discreet.”

Every translation hits a crossroads like this. My preference is always towards idiom, to find some equivalence within those metaphors inherent to spoken English. Biting your lip, as a metaphor for discretion, came easily. It has a natural sexual dimension, enhanced perhaps by the distant echo of “bitten” and “ridden.” Later I remembered the image for realization we have, and it seemed apt for the setting: “It dawned out there/to leave my lip bitten.”

The malcasada (unhappily married woman) was a common trope of oral folk verse. In Lorca’s take, written in the mid-twenties, a gypsy gunslinger brags of making a woman of her in the wilderness in the heat of July. But for one or two expansions or contractions, my version maps “La Casada Infiel” line for line. One of the translator’s primary attributes, I increasingly believe, is the humility to accept those moments where the straight version is sweetest. Given the subject of the original, and the strange place I was working out of, this fidelity seemed more important than would usually be the case. I really wanted to be faithful to Lorca’s version of infidelity.

Sometimes I look at a poem and think, “How long ago did this begin?” I’d trace this one to Joe, our father’s best friend and the rock on which Dad leaned—often literally. Joe was in love with our mother and wooed her while the old man lay comatose on the floor between them. Joe was a civil servant with major odor issues and a Ford that had no reverse gear. Mam had five sons; she needed wheels. Joe lent us his Ford those weekdays he was lodging in Dublin and got to profess his lovesickness hopelessly on the Sunday night handover of keys—often with me sitting gooseberry in the rear seat. Of the many gifts he showered on her, there was a copy of Lowell’s *Imitations* inscribed with a line of Edward FitzGerald’s translation of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*: “Look to the Rose that blows about us.” She shrugged and I, about sixteen, swallowed it wholesale. I loved Lowell’s version of Montale’s “Giorno e notte” so much that I eventually did my own version of the same poem. It was the first thing I ever had in print. Something of that has to be in here too. — co
The Burning Kite

What a thing it would be, if we all could fly. But to rise on air does not make you a bird.

I'm sick of the hiss of champagne bubbles. It's spring, and everyone's got something to puke.

The things we puke: flights of stairs, a skyscraper soaring from the gut,

the bills blow by on the April breeze followed by flurries of razor blades in May.

It's true, a free life is made of words. You can crumple it, toss it in the trash,

or fold it between the bodies of angels, attaining a permanent address in the sky.

The postman hands you your flight of birds persisting in the original shape of wind.

Whether they're winging toward the scissors' V or printed and plastered on every wall

or bound and trussed, bamboo frames wound with wire or sentenced to death by fire

you are, first and always, ash.

Broken wire, a hurricane at each end. Fire trucks scream across the earth.

But this blaze is a thing of the air. Raise your glass higher, toss it up and away.
Few know this kind of dizzy glee:
an empty sky, a pair of burning wings.
Mother, Kitchen

Where the immemorial and the instant meet, opening and distance appear.
Through the opening: a door, crack of light.
Behind the door, a kitchen.

Where the knife rises and falls, clouds gather, disperse.
A lightspeed joining of life and death, cut in two: halves of a sun, of slowness.

Halves of a turnip.
A mother in the kitchen, a lifetime of cuts.
A cabbage cut into mountains and rivers, a fish, cut along its leaping curves,
laid on the table still yearning for the pond.

Summer’s tofu cut into premonitions of snow.
A potato listens to the onion-counterpoint of the knife, dropping petals at its strokes:
self and thing, halves of nothing at the center of time.
Where gone and here meet, the knife rises, falls.

But this mother is not holding a knife.

What she has been given is not a knife but a few fallen leaves.
The fish leaps over the blade from the sea to the stars. The table is in the sky now, the market has been crammed into the refrigerator, and she cannot open cold time.

Translated from the Chinese by Austin Woerner
One would think a poet who owns over thirty thousand classical music CDs would write verse driven by sound, rhythm, melody. So when I first sat down with Ouyang Jianghe in a Beijing coffee shop to dissect his poems, I expected a revelation along these lines. I thought that if I understood the music of this obtuse, gnarled language, I might better sing in his voice—and convey something essential about this essentially untranslatable poetry.

But I got none of this. All he gave me—or was willing to give me—was a scattering of observations about how one thing relates to another: notice a horizontal thing here, a vertical thing there; here black, here white; here in, here out. And yet, I came to learn, this is the music of his poetry. Sonority matters little to him—yet he arranges the elements of a poem as a composer structures a piece of music, through stylized repetition, juxtaposition, and development of motifs. He’s like Bach busy at his fugues, moved more by math than passion, building stark, intricate cathedrals to vault our minds above the everyday.

My job is to capture this music of ideas—which requires great sacrifice, considering how rife his poetry is with double meaning. In “Mother, Kitchen,” the word I take as “opening,” kāihe, actually means the action of opening and closing, like a box-lid or door. Finding no such word in English, I need to choose between these two meanings, cant the word so only one facet shows—making sure that facet catches the light of all other facets it was meant to reflect. Only “opening” will do, as it must evoke a door, to be echoed in the next line and the last. The “cabbage,” poor substitute for liangbansansi, a slaw-like noodle salad whose name puns with “two halves,” chimes instead with potato, turnip, sun: round things all, to be halved.

What is actually evoked by these images is less important than that they evoke each other. Meaning is secondary. Ouyang describes his goal in writing as creating an emptiness, a vessel. “The Burning Kite” strikes me as a prime example of an “empty” poem—bare architecture inviting the reader to fill it with the furniture of her thoughts. My goal as translator is to replicate this architecture, widen the space within. The kite imagined is, of course, a Chinese kite, made of paper, not nylon, and shaped like a bird. —AW
HSIA YÜ

Mozart in E-flat Major

I turn around.
I feel Monday’s well-shaven face lightly caress my left shoulder
most cherished part
most crucial here and now
To Be Elsewhere

We met in a coastal village
spent a lovely night without leaving an address
going separate ways. Three years later
we meet again by coincidence.
The whole
three years spun a novel
we abandoned:
They fail to recognize themselves
as though meeting in another story
for an encounter.
One asks: Who are you, so cold and weary
The other says: I only know a thread is loose on my sweater
   The more you pull it, the more it lengthens
until I completely vanish.

Translated from the Chinese by Karen An-hwei Lee
Translator’s Note

Unlike Hsia Yü, I did not grow up in Taipei, though I have visited. At first, I thought her name was a homophone of “it rains” or “rain-ing.” But Hsia is summer, a common Chinese last name, not rain at all, which is hsia yü. When I see the two syllables, a rain of ink falls across transparent summer.

As a translator, I confess these English lines are not purely transparent. English syntax rarely matches the Chinese, and as a speaker of both, I find the rich vowels of tonal Chinese a rigorous exercise to render in English.

Double-syllable repetitions in “Mozart in E-flat Major” posed a special task. “Qing qing” at the end of the second line translates literally as “lightly lightly,” the caress of a loved one’s well-shaven face. The last two lines of the poem, parallel in syllable number and syntax, are transliterated, “zhui zhui qing ai de ju bu/zhui zhui zhong yao de xian zai.” These musical lines in Chinese, rendered into English, lose the tender succinctness of “zhui zhui,” literally “most most” or “dearest dearest,” merely repetitious in this language.

As a poet-translator, I wish to illuminate the beauty of one language in another, two languages I love: English and Chinese. As an experiment, I began with the last lines. I tinkered with “most cherished portion/most crucial present,” initially sacrificing the double-repetition of “zhui zhui” but preserving the parallel syntax and syllable number. However, “present” also introduced valences not in the original: present as time, but not present as gift. “Xian zai” is, more or less, “now and here.” I settled on “most cherished part/most crucial here and now.” I omitted the second “lightly” (qing) in the first stanza.

A literal translation would read, “feel Monday new shave finished face lightly lightly.” Writing the lines, “I feel Monday’s well-shaven face lightly/caress my left shoulder,” I hoped for a miracle, spirit infusing letter with the mystique of transparency. Seamless pronouns in “To Be Elsewhere,” for instance, lose rhythm—and atmosphere, one of lyric anonymity—in English. I resisted a temptation to insert quotation marks or italics for dialogue after “three years spun a novel/we abandoned,” laying bare, instead, the third-person shift:
“They fail to recognize themselves/as though meeting in another story/for an encounter.”

Recently, I heard that Hsia Yü designed a transparent book of poems, Pink Noise (2007), using a machine-translator named Sherlock. The physical book-object is transparent. You see right through it, except for the words laser-printed on zylonite. The poems are bilingual machine-translations of her originals, in turn assembled from various digital sources. I admired, even envied, her daring aesthetic and fiduciary risks: Hsia Yü published Pink Noise with her own funds, creating a book that literally passes light.

With these translations, I hope we hear an echo of Hsia Yü’s music, aglow with hues in their English versions. — KAL
From Daddy sprung my inborn ribaldry.
His crudeness destined me to be the same.
A seedlet, flowered from a shitty heap,
I came, the crowning glory of his aim.

From Mother I inherited ennui,
The leg irons of the queendom I once rattled.
But I won’t let such chains imprison me.
And there is just no telling what this brat’ll…!

This marriage thing? We snub our nose at it.
What’s pearl turns piss, what’s classy breeds what’s smutty.
But like it? Lump it? Neither’s exigent.
And I’m the end result of all that fucking.

Do what you will! This world’s your oyster, Pet.
But be forewarned. The sea might drown you yet.

Translated from the German by Jill Alexander Essbaum
Translator’s Note

Because I am hardly a Dada aficionada, I was entirely unaware that such a creature as Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven existed until I heard the writer Rene Steinke read from her novel Holy Skirts, a National Book Award finalist based on the Baroness’s eccentric and compelling life. Since then, I’ve learned simply this: Nothing of the Baroness isn’t fascinating.

I was pointed to this poem by Irene Gammel, a Dada and Modernism scholar as well as the editor of the forthcoming book Body Sweats: The Uncensored Writings of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. I was drawn particularly to this poem because it is—at least in its form—decidedly un-Dada; it more closely matches my own aesthetical preferences than do many of the Baroness’s other poems. Gammel’s translation of an alternate draft of this poem was published in a 2003 issue of the Literary Review.

My rendition of “Tühü” is more interpretive than faithful to its source. For example, the Baroness’s poem is nineteen lines of varying meter. I have translated it as a strict sonnet, lopping off a few images in the process. Too, my version is coarser than the first. While this stylistic decision perhaps led me further away from Elsa’s poem, it was a choice that brought me nearer to Elsa herself, icon of bawdy irreverence that she was.

I take my title from the poem’s Gammel-translated variant draft “Analytische Chemie der Frucht,” interpreted by Gammel as “Analytical Chemistry of Progeny.” My title veers widely; “Tühü” vaguely translates as “Ta-da” or “Hurrah” or any number of exclamations difficult to render.

The first two lines (my version collapses into one) are my favorites: “Der Hang zur Zote ist mir eingeboren—/Von meinem Papa hab ich ihn geerbt—.” For years I’ve pleaded my own case to parents, pastors, and exceptionally prudish friends. Not only is this the perfect comeback, hereafter it shall be my only comeback. Danke, Baroness.—JAE
Dear Editor,

Maybe because I had been so avidly reading Timothy Donnelly’s The Cloud Corporation — and then attended a reading during which Donnelly delivered exactly the sort of contained glee I had found in the collection — I was vexed by David Orr’s weary-sounding review [“Public Poetry,” April 2011]. The less successful passages Orr cites in support of the phrase “exquisite, cheerless noodling” are among the few places in the collection that I myself found not especially interesting or moving. But they seem quite anomalous among the 152 pages of the book. And several of Orr’s doubting characterizations are dubious. I would not call Donnelly’s syntax Jamesian, nor would I call his style “haute academic,” though it is challenging. I don’t understand why Donnelly’s political protests and griefs are any less trenchant or more practically impotent than other poets’. But it’s the several very general, blasé, and dismissive parts of the review that I think are unfair: “a general distaste for finance and/or capitalism”; “the epitome of Our Moment”; “the sort of writing [the collection] represents”; “certain audiences.” This may be a very trendy book and have garnered trendy readers and unusually happy reviews. But in my experience of it, it’s estimably intense, conscientious, cleverly made, and often thrillingly beautiful. I’m baffled by Orr’s faint praise.

CIA WHITE
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

Dear Editor,

In his commentary on “public poetry” in April’s issue, David Orr raises some astute points but does not fully confront notions about whether poetry is beholden to the poet, to an audience, both, or neither.

While critiquing Thomas Sayers Ellis’s use of rejection letters and place-specific references as “unambitious,” Orr leaves unexplained the implications of discussing these elements as poetic blind spots.
rather than demarcations of the poet’s perspective. His complaints about a hermetic “audience composed almost entirely of poets” are beneficial—to an extent. Is Ellis then obligated to address the experiences he deems significant only in terms that, ostensibly, some hypothetical public will relate to?

Orr’s discussion of Wilner’s book is also problematic for this reason. Predicated on the idea that “violent tendencies” like war can be understood, Orr finds fault with Wilner’s self-proclaimed failure to do so. And yet no support is offered for the myth, whether put forth by poets or historians, of an end-all framework for our species’ violence. I am unsure if I agree with the extension of this logic: that poetry need aspire to certainty or at least theoretical claims in the same way that, say, political theory does. If this is the case, where instead can we perform the work of unraveling our knotted thoughts?

Certainly poetry should not (and cannot, no matter how much it feigns) divorce itself from the politics of a very real world; Ellis and Wilner both speak to social ills. But perhaps not all poems can satiate the needs of the self and Orr’s idealized public at once. We ask that poets speak honestly of their innermost selves—and that they speak to us, for us, about things relevant to our lives. Which one is it?

Andrew David King
Berkeley, California

David Orr responds:

Andrew David King’s thoughtful letter raises two interesting and related questions. The first has to do with personal reference. Is Thomas Sayers Ellis, King wonders, actually obligated to frame his personal experiences “in terms that … some hypothetical public will relate to?” No. A poet can write about whatever he likes for whomever he pleases. But when a poet is talented, as Ellis is, and has the ability to speak broadly, as Ellis does, then it can be disappointing to see him fail to engage the hypothetical public that he himself seems most drawn to. As I try to suggest in my review, however, Skin, Inc. is largely successful—and it is successful precisely because, for the most part, Ellis is writing about what he really cares about, and the public he both reaches for and creates is central to that concern.

King’s second point relates to the poet’s duty to, well, reality. King asks why I fault Eleanor Wilner for failing to understand violence
and war when, after all, historians and philosophers—and, of course, scientists—don’t fully understand these phenomena either. The problem here is the word “understand.” Poets aren’t obligated to understand the behaviors they write about if by “understand” we mean “have detailed theories regarding.” But they are obligated to at least attempt to have some sort of relation to those behaviors. It isn’t enough to say—about violence or anorexia or ski mask fetishism—“Yeah, I just don’t get it.” Unless, of course, the point of the poem is the author’s own limitations, about which he shouldn’t seem to be patting himself on the back.

Dear Editor,

Just wanted to write you a quick note saying how much I enjoyed the March issue and especially “Brother, I’ve seen some” by Kabir. Reading it, I had one of those wonderful experiences where I immediately recalled another poem I have loved for a very long time:

I have often met the evil of living:
the gurgle of the strangled brook,
the papering of the parched leaf,
the fallen horse, dying.

Of good I found little more than the omen
disclosed by the divine Indifference:
the statue in the drowsing
noon, and the cloud, and the hawk soaring.

— Eugenio Montale, tr. by William Arrowsmith

Though the particulars of the paradoxes both poets employ come from very different cultures, religious traditions, and histories, they both ask what is the meaning of it all. Of course a fifteenth-century Indian poet and a twentieth-century Italian poet would take on this same subject. But still—their similarities and differences make for a very interesting comparison.

And while I’m at it, let me tell you how much I enjoy your monthly podcast. Please keep doing them. I always play the podcast twice, once while walking my dog and then again with the issue in hand, following along as you and the authors read the poems. In this month’s
podcast [“Expert in Earth, Eager in Flesh,” March 2011] it was great that you chose not to edit out your surprise at Carolyn Forché’s having changed a couple of lines of her poem.

I also loved the poems by Gottfried Benn, especially “Beautiful Youth.” I’ve had a lot of fun showing it to a couple of acquaintances (ones with good senses of humor) who still somehow think poetry is only good for the expression of worn-out sentiments. Oh, a lovely poem about the beauty of youth, one thinks as he approaches the poem’s title and first lines. And then fairly quickly, as the poem accretes meaning, this feeling changes to horror, revulsion, and then amazement and joy—joy, if you give it to the right reader, that is. It’s one of those poems you can give to a new acquaintance to decide if you could be friends.

FRANK GIAMPIETRO
BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA

Dear Editor,

Before the time slips away, I add my praise for the wonderful notebook selections from Anna Kamienska [“Industrious Amazement,” tr. by Clare Cavanagh, March 2011] which—like the first excerpts—fulfill my idea of true “found poetry,” if we understand poetry as a condensation or distillation to purest elements.

I hope Cavanagh is encouraged by the response to publish a book-length translation of Kamienska’s notebook. In any event, having the taste to publish something this sublime, *Poetry* must be forgiven any number of future lapses.

ERIC LUND
GREENVILLE, CALIFORNIA

Dear Editor,

Adam Kirsch’s review of the *Anthology of Rap* [“How Ya Like Me Now,” February 2011] follows the editors of the anthology itself in believing that rap lyrics have a value independent of the backbeat and the hook. Why textualize (and, thereby, decontextualize) this form
of music? Why do we think there is any profit to be derived in comparing poetry, which is written down mostly for individual readers, and rap, which is thrown down in front of a crowd? Wouldn’t it be wiser to compare apples to apples — say, rock lyrics and rap lyrics? To examine their relative foregrounding of words or music? We might arrive at some interesting conclusions — we might see, for example, how rap, like the lieder of Schubert and the songs of Bob Dylan, emphasizes lyrics over instrumentation, and verbal over musical virtuosity. Or how rap represents the very limit of this phenomenon; or the irony that verse-averse America created this music that is the closest music can come to verse and still stay music. These are the dynamics of rap that deserve scholarly study and critical acumen. The editors of this anthology have collected, and Kirsch in his review has discussed, something that is neither rap nor poetry.

AMIT MAJMUDAR
DUBLIN, OHIO

Dear Editor,

Joshua Mehigan’s poetry totally rocks! More, please! And more A.E. Stallings while you’re at it. Plus more Clive James reviews, if you (and he) would be so kind.

MELINDA SMITH
CANBERRA, AUSTRALIA

Letters should be sent with the writer’s name, address, and phone number via e-mail to editors@poetrymagazine.org. Letters may be edited for length and clarity. We regret that we cannot reply to every letter.
Abid b. al-abras* (ca. 500–554 AD) is considered the oldest of the Jahiliyya (pre-Islamic), classical poets of the Arabian peninsula. His “Aqfara min ahlīhi Malhubu,” the final passage of which is translated here, is one of the celebrated odes of the Mu’allaqāt.

Eugênio de Andrade* (1923–2005) published twenty-nine volumes of poetry in his lifetime. His work has been honored by all of Portugal’s major literary awards and translated into over twenty languages. In 2003 New Directions published Forbidden Words, a volume of selected poems translated by Alexis Levitin. The poems in this issue originally appeared in Memória Doutro Rio, 1978.

Robert Archambeau’s books include Laureates and Heretics (University of Notre Dame Press, 2010) and Home and Variations (Salt Publishing, 2004). He teaches at Lake Forest College and has written the Samizdat Blog since 2004.

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), one of the major German poets of the twentieth century, is best known in the English-speaking world for his radically experimental theater works.

Joel Brouwer is the author of, most recently, And So (Four Way Books, 2009). He teaches at the University of Alabama.

Antoine de Chandieu* (1534–1591) was a pastor, theologian, polemicist, community organizer, and occasional poet who played a key role in the establishment of the Protestant Church in France.

Brooklyn Copeland lives in Indianapolis, where she works as an auditor and a yoga instructor. She’s the author of several chapbooks and the recipient of a 2010 Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation.

Cynewulf* is one of the four Anglo-Saxon poets known by name whose work still survives.

Jill Alexander Essbaum is the author of several books of poetry including Harlot (No Tell Books, 2007) and the single-poem chapbook The Devastation (Cooper Dillon, 2009). She teaches in the UCR-Palm Desert low residency MFA program.
Claude Esteban (1935–2006) was a French poet, essayist, and translator. He published thirteen books of poems and several collections of essays on poetry, literature, and visual art, and he translated Paz, Borges, and García Lorca into French. He was awarded the Mallarmé Prize, the Grand Prix de Poésie de la Société des gens de lettres, the France Culture Prize, and the Prix Goncourt.

Jad Fair* has released over fifty albums and is also an accomplished artist. Sixteen books of his art have been published worldwide.

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven* (1874–1927) was a German-born avant-garde poet. Known for her flamboyance and sexual frankness, the Baroness was a central figure in Greenwich Village’s early-twenties Dadaism.

Robert Hasenfratz* is co-chair of the Medieval Studies Program at the University of Connecticut and co-editor of the Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures.

H.L. Hix’s most recent books are a selected poems, First Fire, Then Birds: Obsessionals 1985–2010 (Etruscan Press, 2010), and a translation, made with the author, of Eugenijus Ališanka’s from unwritten histories (Host Publications, 2011).

Hsia Yü* (also Xia Yu) is the author of several volumes of poetry, most recently Pink Noise (2007). A founding editor of the Taiwanese avant-garde literary zine, Xianzai Shi (Poetry now), she currently resides in Taipei where she works as a lyricist and translator.


Nate Klug’s work is forthcoming in Common Knowledge, the Three-penny Review, and Zoland Poetry Annual. A 2010 Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellow, he is also a student at Yale Divinity School.

Labid* (ca. 560–661 AD) is one of the late poets of the classical Arabic period. He is said to have converted to Islam at the age of ninety, but one of his qasidas is included in the pre-Islamic Mu’allaqāt.

Karen An-hwei Lee is the author of Ardor (Tupelo Press, 2008), In Medias Res (Sarabande Books, 2004), and the chapbook God’s One Hundred Promises (Swan Scythe Press, 2002).
JUHAN LIIV* (1864–1913) died in obscurity, never publishing a book prepared by himself. Since the twenties he has generally been recognized as one of Estonia’s greatest lyrical poets. In 2007 a book of his poetry in English translation appeared: Meel paremat ei kannata/The Mind Would Bear No Better (Tartu University Press).

FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA (1898–1936) is arguably the most celebrated Spanish poet and dramatist of the twentieth century. A supporter of the left-wing Popular Front, he was executed by the forces of General Franco in August 1936.

JOANIE MACKOWSKI has published two books of poems, View From a Temporary Window (2010) and The Zoo (2002), both from University of Pittsburgh Press. She teaches in the creative writing program at Cornell.

PHILIP METRES is a poet and translator whose recent work includes To See the Earth (Cleveland State Poetry Center, 2008). He is the recipient of an Emerging Artist Award in Literature from the Cleveland Arts Prize.

ANGE MLINKO’S most recent book of poetry is Shoulder Season (Coffee House Press, 2010). She won the Poetry Foundation’s Randall Jarrell Award in Criticism in 2009 and teaches at the University of Houston.

CONOR O’CALLAGHAN is an Irish poet based in Manchester in the UK. His most recent book of poems is Fiction (2005). His fourth collection, Among Other Things, will appear in 2013. Both books are published by Wake Forest University Press.

OUYANG JIANGHE*, known as one of the “Five Masters from Sichuan,” is a poet and prominent critic of music, art, and literature, and president of the literary magazine Jintian. His first poetry collection in English, Doubled Shadows, is forthcoming from Zephyr Press.

V. PENELope PELIZZON’S Nostos (Ohio University Press, 2000) won the Hollis Summers Poetry Prize and the Poetry Society of America’s Norma Farber First Book Award.

LUCIA PERILLO’S fifth book of poems, Inseminating the Elephant (Copper Canyon Press 2009), was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Her book of essays, I’ve Heard the Vultures Singing, is now out in paperback from Trinity University Press.

DIMITRI PSURTSEV* is a poet and translator living in Moscow and the author of a number of books of poetry, including *From the Third Rome* (2001) and *Tengiz Notebook* (2001), both published by Izdaniye Yeleny Pakhomovoy.

ATSURO RILEY is the author of *Romey’s Order* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

RAINER MARIA RILKE (1875–1926) is one of the most important poets in the German language. Born in Prague (then part of Austria-Hungary), he led a nomadic life throughout Europe, his residences often supplied by wealthy patrons. He wrote ten books of poetry and one novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*.

REINA MARÍA RODRÍGUEZ* was born in Havana in 1952 and lives there still. In Cuba she is recognized as a major poet and also as an advocate for non-governmental cultural spaces. Her rooftop home, informally known as *la azotea de Reina*, has served as a salon for the Cuban literary community for many years. English translations of her work include *La Detencion del Tiempo/Time’s Arrest* (Factory School 2005), and *Violet Island and Other Poems* (2004) and *The Winter Garden Photography* (2009), both from Green Integer.

STEPHANIE SANDLER teaches in the Slavic Department at Harvard University. She has translated poems by Elena Fanailova, Olga Sедакова, Mara Malanova, and Alexandra Petrova, and is writing a book about contemporary Russian poetry.

ELENA SHVARTS* (1948–2010) published sixteen books of poetry and prose, plus a four-volume collected works during her lifetime. She was a major figure in the Leningrad underground and became widely known and translated after the fall of the Soviet Union.

ANGELOS SIKELIANOS (1884–1951) was born in 1884 on the Ionian island of Lefkada. He and his first wife, the American heiress Eva Palmer, tried to resurrect the Delphic Games with a festival of theater, music, dance, athletics, and handicrafts. He died in Athens after accidentally ingesting Lysol.
Edith Södergran* (1892–1923) was born in St. Petersburg to a Finnish-Swedish family. She contracted tuberculosis when she was sixteen and spent much of her life battling poor health and poverty. She published four books of poetry before her death at the age of thirty-one.

A.E. Stallings is an American poet and translator who has lived in Greece since 1999. Her books include the poems Archaic Smile (University of Evansville Press, 1999) and Hapax (TriQuarterly/Northwestern University Press, 2006), and a verse translation of Lucretius, The Nature of Things (Penguin, 2007). A new collection of poems is forthcoming from Northwestern University Press.

Jessica Stephenson* is a graduate of the University of Alabama currently pursuing a master’s degree in theology at Dallas Theological Seminary.

Juri Talvet* has published eight books of poetry in Estonian and is the chairing professor of comparative literature at Tartu University. His books of poetry and essays have appeared in English, Spanish, and Catalan; his most recent translation into English is Of Snow, of Soul, published in 2010 by Guernica Editions.

Arseny Tarkovsky* (1907–1989) is one of the leading Russian poets to emerge from the Soviet era, though during most of his lifetime he was known for translations of Asian poetries. His son Andrei Tarkovsky’s films gave his verse a second life.

Lucie Thésee* was a poet and teacher from Martinique about whom very little is known. She was associated with both anti-colonial and Négritude circles, and began publishing her poetry in Aimé Césaire’s journal Tropiques in 1942.

D.H. Tracy is the author of Janet’s Cottage, forthcoming from St. Augustine’s Press. He lives in Illinois.

Mohan Tracy* is D.H. Tracy’s mother. Punjabi is her mother tongue. She learned Gurmukhi (a script for Punjabi in which Amrita Pritam wrote) from her grandmother when growing up in Malaysia.

Austin Woerner* is the translator of Doubled Shadows: Selected Poems of Ouyang Jianghe (forthcoming from Zephyr Press) and a novel, Witching Vale, by the Chinese writer-in-exile Su Wei.

* First appearance in Poetry.
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