

# The AALITRA Review

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY TRANSLATION

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## The AALITRA Review

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## Two examples of Untranslatability of Poetry

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to revisit the so-called untranslatability of poetry. The article examines two specific examples – a poem by the Swiss poet Philippe Jaccottet, which I translated from French into English; and a haiku penned by Bashō Matsuo that Jaccottet translated into French from the English version by R. H. Blyth. The first example concerns in particular the double meaning of the French adverb *jamais* (never / ever). The second refers to the semantic ambiguity of the Japanese particle *ha*, which is not always the subject marker. Both examples analyze the difficulty of conveying certain nuances that can be crucial to the appreciation of the poem and finding a word-for-word equivalence between two languages. Such examples show how the poetic language makes the most of the semantic range of one word to reflect the affect of the enunciator, and the resulting ambiguity that its translation will discover can be the core of the poetic language itself.

### Introduction

To reexamine the so-called untranslatability in poetry formerly emphasized by linguists such as Jakobson (238) or Mounin (*Belles infidèles* 24), I shall review two examples, one from a contemporary Swiss poet, Philippe Jaccottet, and another from a seventeenth century haiku master translated by Jaccottet. The first example, an untitled poem by Philippe Jaccottet (1925-2021), is taken from his 1967 collection entitled *Airs*. The relative brevity and the elliptical character of the poems in this collection are mostly inspired by Japanese haiku that Jaccottet rediscovered through the introduction and translations of R. H. Blyth, published between 1949 and 1952 (Low 214). Some poems from *Airs* were translated into English by the Irish poet and translator, Derek Mahon, and published in a collection of Jaccottet's poems, but not the following, which was translated literally by the author of this paper.

*Jeunesse, je te consume  
avec ce bois qui fut vert  
dans la plus claire fumée  
qu'ait jamais l'air emportée*

Youth, I consume you  
with this wood which was green  
in the clearest smoke  
the air has ever swept

*Âme qui de peu t'effraies  
la terre de fin d'hiver  
n'est qu'une tombe d'abeilles*

You soul who from little frightens,  
the earth of winter's end  
is nothing but a bees' tomb

(Jaccottet *Poésie* 101)

This translation, ascribed to a non-native English speaker, may seem somewhat dry and tactless, but that is within the scope of this research article. One apparent change I had to make is found in the first line of the second strophe: the soul was called on as an explicit “you” and became

the third person in translation because it was not easy to restore the same form of address in English. As we will see in what follows, the implicitness can hardly be kept the same.

For the sake of reference, I quote below another translation by a native English speaker, Emma Wagstaff, included in her critical study (109). Her translation is, of course, smoother. The one apparent difference from my translation is her choice of the verb “carry” for “*emporter*”. I chose “sweep” to convey the nuance of the rapidity and the brutality that “*emporter*” contains, but “carry” is more literal. I also wanted “the air” to be the subject in the subordinate clause.

Youth, I consume you  
with this wood that was green  
in the brightest smoke  
ever carried by the air

You, easily frightened soul,  
the earth at winter’s end  
is only a tomb for bees

As Mounin remarked, along with many other authors, more than half a century ago, when translating a poem, the non-semantic elements thought to constitute its form, namely, its aesthetic features, must often be discarded (*Belles infidèles* 28): the target language seldom offers the exact equivalents.

In this example, two elements in particular are lost: the metre (each line in the original scans around six syllables) and the unique rhyme in the mute “e” (whose fading effect seems to represent a dissipation). Any conscientious translator can hardly abandon these effects altogether. Similarly, certain words may present a challenge to the translator. In this case, the word *jamais* in the last line of the first strophe must be considered carefully. Usually, this adverb means “never”. Here, in the original version, the superlative requires another meaning, “ever” (before). Most native French speakers would not hesitate to choose the latter. The beginning French speaker – like the author of this paper himself many years ago – may first be confused by the unusual word order of the line in question: “*qu’ait jamais l’air emportée*”. He will likely read some more poems in French and realise that the rhyme with the previous line, combined here with the visual and phonetical repetition “-ée”, required the inversion of the last two words and, consequently, notice that the adverb “*jamais*” ends up being stressed. The same beginner may still consider the first meaning of the word in the dictionary and would mistakenly translate the text as “the youth was consumed in the clearest smoke the air has never swept away”. He might say to himself, “transparent smoke does not exist, and the air cannot even blow it away”. This rendering sounds nonsensical, almost “out of joint”, to apply Hamlet’s famous expression that Ludwig Binswanger quoted in order to differentiate what poetic language expresses from a thought disorder: a finely structured poem like the one presented above aims to put in words a particular state of mind, sketching or forming “a new eidetic region” (163). Here, the word *jamais* seems to play a key role in nuancing this unfamiliar territory of thought mingled with memory.

However, let us move on from Binswanger and go back to the same beginner in French who was trying to understand the line under consideration. With reflection, he will realize the correct meaning of the line, replacing “never” with “ever”. Yet, the first impression, albeit “out of joint”, may remain. Perhaps the youth was consumed in this implausible, unacceptable absurdity. Jaccottet himself might have even intended to allude to this first meaning “never”. In fact, youth can be as much associated with never as with ever; if it ever existed, it will never



exist again. Like smoke, youth vanishes *forever*, and its singular occurrence and its entire disappearance are unthinkable, which indicates an oxymoronic effect enhanced by the superlative, “the clearest smoke”. The word *fumée* [fyme] evokes fugacity. Its last letter is phonetically void, standing for the mute “e”, spreading in this poem (present at least twice, maybe three times in the first line: “*Jeunesse, je te consume*”).<sup>1</sup> The first strophe begins with *jeunesse*, and its last line alliterates with *jamais*. The word *fumée* also alliterates with the simple past *fut*. These symbolic alliterations and the dispersion of “e” are indeed untranslatable.

One thing that has emerged from the above is the fundamental affinity between writing poetry and the latent act of translation: the poet is someone who approaches his or her native language as if it were a foreign tongue; he can make resound his language in some other way than our routine usage reducing words to their most common and accepted meanings. Mallarmé is an appropriate example: as Valéry remarked, he had as much “musical delicacy” for his mother tongue as an “infinitely subtle feeling” for his second language, English (Valéry 686).

In the poem presented above, there is the obvious feeling of impossibility and ineffability that the whole text and, above all, the adverb *jamais* seeks to convey. It is common to say that those days will *never* come back, but there may be an uncommon way in which a well-elaborated poem expresses this awareness in a given language. In other words, although the feeling of remorse about the passing of time or lost youth is common to mankind and expressed in lyric poetry of every language, how it appears in each can be very particular, just as the poem I translated exemplifies the use of *jamais* or with the dissemination of the mute “e”. As another example, Yeats begins *Sailing to Byzantium* with the line, “That is no country for old men”. In Yves Bonnefoy’s French translation, the title becomes “*Byzance, l’autre rive* [Byzantium, the other bank]”, and the first line: “*Non, ce pays / N’est pas pour le vieil homme* [No, this country / is not for the old man]” (Yeats 62). The fact that Bonnefoy modified the Yeats’ saying a little more than necessary shows that he was almost emotionally involved in it: the other side of the river Styx in Greek mythology is also the realm of death, and the awareness of heading toward the end of one’s life made Bonnefoy begin the first two lines with the emphatic negation in a conversational tone. But we know that saying just “no” or “never” does not help much, as Jaccottet voiced in another poem: “To speak is to lie, or worse: a craven / insult to grief or a waste / of the little time and energy at our disposal [*Parler alors semble mensonge, ou pire : lâche / insulte à la douleur, et gaspillage / du peu de temps et de forces qui nous reste*]” (Mahon’s translation 121). Baudelaire had his word for this disconsolate and inexpressible feeling: “*L’irréremédiable*”. Nonetheless, the word derives from its antonym, “*remède* [remedy]”, and is finally denied with a negative prefix.

The bifurcation of meaning takes us back to the word *jamais*. In the fourth line, its implied but evident meaning of “never” is not directly translatable unless the target language has the same kind of word (like *mai* in Italian). In English (my translation), “ever” might suggest its negative form *in absentia*, but it still seems difficult to guess when it is not spelled out explicitly, as shown in this example: “... the smoke the air has ever swept and never brings back”. Etymologically, the French word *jamais* first meant “never” in the tenth century, before it encompassed the opposite meaning in the thirteenth century, according to the etymological dictionary of the Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales (CNRTL). In English, the two words remained separated, meaning that the antonym produced with just an additional letter was maintained. We can speculate on the etymology of how “once” and “no more” could join and disjoin, even if we remember Émile Benveniste’s remark on Freud (this founder of psychoanalysis attached great importance to some words that have opposite meanings [e.g., Latin *sacer*], asserting it as a proof of the collective unconsciousness. Benveniste makes an

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<sup>1</sup> I chose *you* and not *thou* in English translation. The effect of alliteration is significant.

objection; the semantic organization of a language often requires the arrangement of opposite terms and such a contradiction is not surprising [Benveniste 81]. Still, it may be said that the poet makes us aware of the oscillating meanings of a word). This kind of collective memory concealed in a language can be echoed and noticed in a good poetic work.

When saying “ever,” the poet hinted at “never”, but the thought of “never” was too intense not to be *spelled*. In this regard, an important remark by French psychoanalyst Pierre Fédida comes to mind: the “human word is human and is word on condition it has a double meaning (*Zweideutig*, says Freud)” (119). Ambiguity is essential for natural language. If this kind of double entendre in the letters is untranslatable in another language without paraphrasing, it is clearly unsuitable for a poem to lose its density and rhythm. For Mounin, the characteristics of a poem that are lost in translation may constitute the “aesthetic pertinence” of the poem, that is, “the intimate link between linguistic and poetic signifier and signified” (*Linguistique et traduction* 173). In fact, Mounin translates Dante’s expression “*legame musaico* [bond of muses]”, which creates the harmony of the poetic language for Dante, in linguistic terms (*Belles infidèles* 26). That is, as Mounin suggests, precisely what makes poetry out of the ordinary language.

Concerning the poem quoted above, we may think of the feeling of “*jamais*” reflected concurrently on its external elements and on the semantic range especially in the first strophe. In the second strophe, where “I” speaks to the fragile soul – not even the mind (naturally his own but not necessarily) – in the familiar form (as with “youth”), the tone sounds slightly different. The “I” is nearly telling himself to accept the littleness and the brevity. The word “*peu*”, like “little” in English, oscillates again between two opposite meanings: an almost complete denial and an affirmation of almost nothing (hence, fortunately translatable to English). Indeed, the first untitled poem of *Airs*, begins with this word: “*Peu de chose* [“Not much” in Mahon’s translation 61]”. It may well be a sort of leitmotiv, namely the status of the poetic language. We can also consider the conjugated verb “*effraies*”, the spelling of which seems reminiscent of *L’effraie* [barn owl], one of the first collections of poems Jaccottet published in 1953. It may be remembered that the owl itself was connected to an ancient deity in Greek and Roman Egypt: its statues or reliefs remain. Seen or heard, this nocturnal bird flying low in Europe could conjure recollections of the survival of the mythical or mystic background. The names of “Birds, flowers and fruits [*Oiseaux, fleurs et fruits*]” (title of another poem in *Airs*), especially the first two, can be evocative of many things for Jaccottet, who roams the countryside of Provence and find them easily. It may be added that these names, like proper nouns, resist translation (Constantine 69).

This related information can help provide a better appreciation of the poem, but it is not directly translatable either. This kind of knowledge will be part of the interpretation any literary translation will involve. I now wish to conclude the reading of this poem. The “bees’ tomb [*tombe d’abeilles*]” to which is likened the earth does not exist: “tombe” comes as a homonym of “*tombent* [fall down]”. Birds and bees: their free flight does not last forever. The bees may refer to “the bees of the invisible [*die Bienen des Unsichtbaren*]” that Rilke suggested about his Duino Elegies in a letter dated 13 November 1925 (Rilke 376): we are the creatures collecting and converting inside us the honey of the visible world, so ephemeral. In this regard, it may be mentioned that Freud, in his 1915 paper “On Transience [*Vergänglichkeit*]”, recounts an encounter with a young poet, probably Rilke, mourning in mid-summer what will be gone in Winter: “The idea that all this beauty was transient was giving [this sensitive mind] a foretaste of mourning over its decease” (306). The poets collect the honey of the visible beauty – or to put in Hölderlin’s words, “bring together / The beautiful things of the earth [*bringen zusammen / Das Schöne der Erd*]” (Hölderlin 252), but this beauty, as Freud remembered his discussion with the young poet after the beginning of the First World War, shall be destroyed

in any manner, even if it will be reborn. Jaccottet, who translated some works of Rilke and Hölderlin, wrote in his poem “The work of the poet [*Le travail du poète*]” that this work consists of watching out, so as to save from the world that we see just for the time being “what twinkles and will extinguish [*ce qui scintille et va s'éteindre*]” (Jaccottet, *Poésie* 65) – that which is comparable to the bees that will one day fall.

Jaccottet admits that his nature tends towards what he calls “the poem-discourse”, keeping some aspects of daily speech, rather than “the poem-moment”, condensed and embodied in the poem cited above. Other examples of the latter are some short poems by Giuseppe Ungaretti and haikus (Jaccottet, *La semaison* 47); Emily Dickinson’s poems, also brief, will be considered later. Before looking at the haiku Jaccottet translated, I want to quote the passage of “the poem-discourse” he wrote in the 1970s. At the beginning of the poem entitled “*Pensées sous les nuages* [Thoughts under the clouds]”, the impossibility of the trip, of flight for “us” is confirmed: “I don’t think finally we’ll make this trip, / across all these skies that would be clearer little by little, [...] I hardly see us in the invisible wings forever circling the tops, invisible too [*Je ne crois pas décidément que nous ferons ce voyage / à travers tous ces ciels qui seraient de plus en plus clairs, [...] Je nous vois mal en aigles invisibles, à jamais tournoyant autour de cimes invisibles elles aussi*]”. The cloud is another ephemeral atmospheric formation, suspended in the air. Thus, it becomes a symbolic motif in Jaccottet’s poetry. Derek Mahon translated the title as “Cloud thoughts”, but I prefer the literal rendition because the thoughts themselves are not identified with clouds in the poem, and what matters in this title is the *Stimmung*, the state of being, or a certain ambiance to which our soul state is attuned. In this poem, the aerial shroud hanging over “us” overlaps with “our” gloomy thoughts.

Following the first line of the poem, the enunciator I (*je*), as if split, continues: “But where did you still wish to go, with these worn-out feet? [*Mais où donc pensez-vous aller encore, avec ces pieds usés?*]... We see you better in the crevices of labor, sweating a sweat of death, rather somber than carried towards these last proud swans [*On vous voit mieux dans les crevasses des labours, suant une sueur de mort, plutôt sombres qu'emportés vers ces derniers cygnes fiers*]...” (Jaccottet, *À la lumière d’hiver* 115; my translation. The word “*Pieds* [feet]” of course should be understood in its double meaning – hence, there is no problem with the English translation. As Jaccottet once told me in a letter, the image of the tired poet-traveller in this poem was inspired by Dante).

The swan, an attribute of the poet (here “last” and “proud” but already gone), reminds us of another poem of Saturnian inspiration (Saturn is also a God of tillage). Baudelaire’s “The Swan”, in which we hear the repetition of *jamais* – the I, with compassion, says “*À quiconque a perdu ce qui ne se retrouve / Jamais, jamais!* [of whoever has lost that which is never found again, never!]” (Baudelaire 86 [William Aggeler’s translation of 1954]). This poem brings to mind Mallarmé’s famous sonnet on Swan, but *jamais* may evoke his translation of Poe’s “Raven”: “*Jamais plus*” for “Nevermore”). I do not say Jaccottet was inspired by Baudelaire’s poem, but the impossibility of leaving, leaping, and flying makes me think of Bashō’s haiku that he retranslated from the English translation by R. H. Blyth; this will be the second example to be examined.

There is a difference of the cultural context. No angel’s wings let us suppose about the invisible world, no allegorization (especially with personification) entails the assumption of the meta-physical dimension. All of this arrives at the question of literality: as it is. How should a translation be done, particularly when it is from such a different language shaped in such a different tradition? In this case, the so-called literal translation may risk becoming too flat (to say nothing of the retranslation). However, as shown in the translation, the literal flatness without the allegorical (or illusory) depth is not as flat as we think.

The following is the original haiku: “旅に病んで夢は枯れ野をかけめぐる *tabi ni yande yume ha kareno wo kakemeguru*”. The Blyth version: “Ill on a journey: / My dreams wander / Over a withered moor” (Blyth 107). Jaccottet’s retranslation from this version is as follows: “*Tombé malade en voyage: errent mes rêves sur une lande aride* [Fallen ill on a journey: wander my dreams over an arid moor]” (Jaccottet, *Haïku*). I think that both versions, sufficiently laconic and literal, succeed in capturing what matters most in the original: unspeakable feelings and intense thoughts of a withering poet-traveler. Readers may be interested in knowing some of Bashō’s work and the fact that this is the last haiku he wrote in 1694: we naturally look for the poem’s original context, stemming from a “poetic, emotional and cultural *situation*” (Mounin, *Linguistique et traduction* 181).

Jaccottet added “*tomber* [fall]” and operated the subject-verb inversion (natural in French for this kind of sentence); compared with the Blyth version, “*errent*” is the phonetic equivalent of “*Airs* [ɛ:r]”. We may note in Jaccottet’s collection, *Airs* mentioned above, the expression “*L’œil erre* [The eye wanders]” (Jaccottet, *Poésie* 139). Actually, in Jaccottet’s translation, we can once again observe the diffusion of the mute “e”; even though it is rather likely to happen here because of the requirement of each word’s meaning, the terms selected reflect his preference. He intentionally echoes certain phonemes, if only the mute “e”. Acoustically, we should also add that Blyth, for his part, makes us aware of the assonance, “wander [...] over [...] withered”. “*Lande aride*” is not quite exact but it is not easy to use the French equivalent to “withered”, *fané*, which is suitable for plants but not for *lande*. “Withered” also implies “dead”, which is suitable here (especially when the ideogram 枯 is composed of two parts each representing “wood” and “old”), but “moor” in place of “field” may evoke the highlands, the imagery of which could be important for Blyth. At least “withered moor” and “*lande aride*” are three syllables like “*kareno*”.

From the native perspective, there are two important aspects of untranslatability in the original. The first is the excess of the number of syllables in the first foot (+1): Bashō’s thought went beyond the metrical convention prescribing five. If the inexpressible affect let Bashō extend for but one more syllable – a particle *te(de)* meaning here “and” – as he could have observed the convention –, this effect cannot be rendered in translation (the discussion whether it is appropriate to transfer a fixed form of verse from one language into another with a different phonetic structure is outside the scope of this article. For example, Jaccottet translated *Odyssey* of Homer in free verse). The second is the ambiguity of the particle *ha* accompanying “*yume*” (dream). Unlike *ga* accentuating the subject, it doesn’t always necessarily indicate that; it means rather “as for” and here it is unclear. Word-for-word equivalence cannot be found between Japanese and English. How should we interpret and translate this conclusive part? As for the dream, it runs about over a withered field (as there are no articles in Japanese, it is difficult to ascertain whether “dream” is singular or plural). Or *I* (myself) is the subject that wanders (as the translation in modern Japanese suggests usually), but in full retreat – even the possessive adjective “my” is not necessary in Japanese: the sentence “dream wanders” stands as it is. So, the latest French translation, helped along by a Japanese translator, proposes: “[...] in a dream, I wander [...]” (“*Malade en voyage / en rêve, je flâne / dans la campagne déserte l’hiver*” [Bashō 349]). This translation, semantically correct but less dense than that of Jaccottet’s, also makes the repetition of the mute “e” a little less sensitive. The rendition is close to Carter’s: “Ill on a journey, / I run about in my dreams / over withered fields” [366]). However, this may be somewhat too explicit. Nowadays, most Japanese will take this *ha* spontaneously as the subject marker as did Blyth (and Jaccottet).<sup>2</sup> That is not necessarily a

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<sup>2</sup> Most of the English translations consider “dream” to be the subject (for examples of translations, see <https://www.uwosh.edu/facstaff/barnhill/es-244-basho/hokku.pdf>). For instance, Ueda’s translation is as follows:

mistake. The use of the particle *ga* would have made the verse strangely emphatic, such as “It is my dream that wanders...”

The grammatical subject (for the verb) is normally needed to translate this kind of sentence into the main European languages, such as English, French and German (Nietzsche’s ancient remark about agglutinative languages in *Beyond Good and Evil* [20] has to be remembered). Berman, who points out the platonic nature of the translation placing greater emphasis on the intelligible (26), noted accurately that semantic ambiguity is more or less destined to be clarified in translation. In the case of this haiku, significantly, Bashō chose a word “dream” and a particle that ends up disturbing the position, or even the notion, of the subject. It is as if the enunciator *I* were at the boundary of consciousness, subject to the dream – even if the poet did not mean to give this impression. We might be able to say that the language itself produces this effect here. In translation, it seems difficult to restore this ambiguity caused by this particle.

In general, the brevity of haiku does not always allow a place for *I*. Also, it may be wrong to lay stress on its absence as a sign of its withdrawal. However, the fact that it is possible in the form of a haiku might suggest that the *I* is there, so to speak, subject to what is perceived and felt instantaneously. If what counts is the feeling of unity with the sensible world, stated as briefly as possible, the appearance / disappearance of the enunciative subject in the original deserves consideration in translation. From this point of view, Jaccottet’s retranslation echoing naturally the mute “e” becomes highly emblematic, especially in “*errent*”, thereby achieving the osmosis between the form and the meaning (Jakobson): the syncope, or even the ellipsis of the “I”, the feeling of evanescence like the dissipation in the air. This is a case where the personal concern of the poet-translator, far from betraying the original, succeeded in matching the original.

The poems discussed above bring into focus two specific problems. First, the double meaning of the French adverb *jamais*; and second, the double meaning of the French adverb *jamais* and the indefinite function of the Japanese particle *ha*. Both highlight the gap between two languages (between French and English, between Japanese and English or French), and both raise the question of nuance that the lyric poetry of every language reveals. Such examples maximize the semantic range of one word to better reflect the effect, rather than the intellect, of the enunciator. The inexpressible feeling needs to be received or reflected by a semantic sway, even between extremes such as ever / never. The inconclusiveness remains and resounds through certain (formal and semantic) signs in the mind of a sensitive reader. This inconclusiveness that the poetic language may hold in itself can be one of its key attributes. When it seems cryptic, it is potentially the equivalent of “the mysterious meaning of the aspects of existence” according to Mallarmé, expressed through “the essential rhythm,” inherent in each tongue (I paraphrase Mallarmé’s famous definition of poetry [Mallarmé 572]). The achieved expression of this ambiguity, the inexplicability or the obscurity, can be a sort of “mystery” in this secularized – and computerized – world.

However, we cannot translate this obscurity, forged by the condensed expression of the original, without rewording and, thus, taking the risk of insipidly clarifying and damaging it.

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“On a journey, ailing – / My dreams roam about / On a withered moor” (Ueda 413). In Shirane’s version: “sick on a journey / dreams roam about / On a withered moor” (Shirane 279). Actually Bashō, in the first state of this haiku, seemed to have conceived “dream” as the subject, placing the word at the end without any particle. The function of the particle *ha* in the final version is still unclear. Another view of this *ha* suggests that Bashō, having in mind a passage of Su Shi’s poem saying, “as for the mind..., and as for the dream...,” meant in this haiku: as for my dream it wanders on a withered moor, and as for my mind it comes down there. The author thanks Yūsuké Inaba for some additional information about this haiku.

As observed through these examples, the semantic ambiguity is rarely preserved in translation. It seems still better to start from the literal translation (without over-interpretation), so that the unresolved nature of the original may survive to a certain extent. The choice of just one meaning can destroy that. Yet other remaining elements may also save some of the ineffability. To use Benjamin's expression in "The Task of the Translator", it can well be what should "survive" in translation, even when a translation is retranslated. Contrary to Benjamin's approach to the "task", over-interpretation blurs the intention, sometimes unarticulated, of the author and the translation will not "echo" the original properly. The over-interpretation should not be part of the "creative transposition" that Jakobson advocated in place of the translation of poetry he claimed impossible. And this "creative transposition" should not relieve the translator of his or her "task".

We do not discuss here why Benjamin greatly valued Hölderlin's "literal" translation of Sophocles, which is often judged to be "out of joint" (Marukawa 105), neither do we examine how we should consider some poets' translations involving substantive changes to the poems they translated, such as Celan's (Szondi and Felstiner) or Bonnefoy's (Marukawa 133). But it may be possible to talk in particular about the "survival" and the "echo" of the original with Jaccottet's retranslation of Bashō from Blyth's version, both of which are free of over-interpretation.

We must concede that the literal translation is often preferred by academics, as Mounin claims. I would argue that this literal rendition should be accompanied by an interpretative commentary – which is the task of research and education – to make way for further questioning. However, the translation of a poem should not merely be an accurate accounting of its meaning. It would be ideal that a bit of tact may, without going so far as to the beautification or the distortion, give a new life to the translated poem. This "Gift of the poem [*Don du poème*]", to quote nothing more than Mallarmé's title, can be accompanied by a "musical fidelity [*fidélité musicale*]", if we use Mounin's term, which seems a little out of character for a linguist (Mounin, *Linguistique et traduction* 147). How can a translator be "musically" faithful to a poem written in another language? Now, is not the time to discuss this question. I cannot return to the validity of parallels between poetry and music, which are so often called into question (Marukawa 10, 239). The tact this translator needs may consist of grasping the original tone and transforming it suitably, affectively, and yet moderately into the target language – his mother tongue, of which he knows by heart the rhythm, inflection, and evocative capacity of each word – but it withstands further generalization at this point.

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# The unreliable translator's territory: Mogens Boisen's Danish translations of James Joyce's *Ulysses*

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## Abstract

This study investigates the types of fingerprints that the Danish translator Mogens Boisen applies in his first translation (passive retranslation) and subsequent two self-retranslations (active retranslations) of the novel *Ulysses* by James Joyce. Through analysis of the translator's contextual voice in the paratexts and textual voice in two selected passages with striking cultural embedding in the last translation, I argue that Boisen retains *Ulysses* as his personal territory of pleasure and pain by way of bodily signposts in the target text. In this way Boisen paradoxically creates a kind of hybrid foreignization which might have pleased Joyce.

## Introduction

The demand that I make of my reader is that he should devote his whole life to reading my works (Joyce in Ellmann 703).

This may be a bold statement by the Irish author James Joyce, but the life-long dedication seems to be the fate of thousands of readers trying to grapple with Joyce's difficult works. And his prediction has been fulfilled: "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of insuring one's immortality" (Joyce in Ellmann 521). One does tend to get caught in the texts' complex network of ambiguity, crafted language and numerous learned allusions and intertextuality. And one such dedicated reader was Mogens Boisen (1910-87), the first Danish translator of *Ulysses*. This is how he is epitomized in an interview reproduced in Boisen's autobiography:

Boisen is an ex-soldier, lieutenant-colonel; and the most military thing about him is that he tends to move like a newly fired rocket: broad and lively, a figure that would seem almost brutal, but for the fact that he radiates his inner muses a long way off. A conversationalist, a wit, a social lion, a fine pianist, an epicure in most aspects of life. 'What is the art of living? Not to miss anything' (193) [my translation].

Boisen was indeed a lieutenant-colonel in the Danish army and he enjoyed a lavish life of parties, food and drink. But he is also Denmark's most remarkable translator of all time as he allegedly translated around 800 books from English, German, Swedish and French into Danish.

Whether Boisen intentionally or unintentionally followed Joyce's bold demand quoted above, the task of translating *Ulysses* became a lifelong obsession. He first translated the novel in 1949, then published a revised edition in 1970, in which episodes 1-5 and 9 have been retranslated from scratch. This was followed by a revised edition published in 1980 and by a final revised edition in 1986. Such dedication to self-retranslations is highly unusual, both in the history of retranslations and when compared with other international translations of *Ulysses*. It is usually the case that retranslations are issued by other translators in different periods in

history, rather than by the same translator. But on the other hand, this is what makes the present study of retranslation so interesting: if a translator's voice, or "fingerprints" (Baker 144), can be seen in a translation (Boase-Beier 57), what kinds of imprints does he actually leave in the translations? And why retranslate in the first place?

Where does Boisen belong in Belitt's so-called "parasitology of translation"? As Belitt's explains "there are certain crustaceans which castrate their hosts, others which attach themselves to large aquatic mammals for the ride and prestige, others which strangle and infect" (56). The parasitology of translation is a metaphorical framing device which lends explanatory power to translators' various motives for translating certain texts, or to their translation strategies, but in a rather unfavourable light. In this study I too aim to adopt a framing metaphor from the animal kingdom as Boisen was not only a "social lion", but an alpha male in the history of Danish literary translation. Rather than sucking the life out of James Joyce like a parasite, he turned the playground of translating *Ulysses* into his home range territory which he defended and presided over by way of auditory and visual signposts in the shape of cultural embedding. Like Belitt's parasites, Boisen certainly attached himself to Joyce for the ride and prestige, but his extraordinary translational fingerprints, which this study is about to reveal, have turned into enigmatic territorial marks which may puzzle the reader – and the professors – just as it was intended by Joyce.

Thus, this study is intended to be an example of what Chesterman calls "translaTOR studies" (2009), that is, an example of the socio-biographical interest in the craftsman behind the translation, combined with more traditional textual analysis of their work. But before explaining Boisen's imprints, I will explain my understanding and use of the terms "retranslation" and "voice" in a Joycean context.

## **Retranslation**

Numerous studies are dedicated to exploring the nature of and motivation behind retranslation which may be defined as "subsequent translations of a text or part of a text, carried out after the initial translation that introduced this text to the 'same' target language" (Susam-Sarajeva 2). Typically, iconic texts are retranslated to improve the first translation, which may be either outdated, flawed or otherwise not up to the standards of a given period or culture (Alvstad and Assis Rosa 11). Hence, a general tendency in retranslation studies is, unsurprisingly, the discussion of retranslation both in terms of the effect of time (Robinson 15-16) and the so-called "Retranslation Hypothesis", namely "the idea that the first translations' inherent assimilating qualities create a need for source-oriented translations" (Paloposki and Koskinen 30). In other words, the first translation tends towards domestication, whereas the subsequent translations are more foreignizing in nature, or "respecting otherness" (Susam-Sarajeva 5). The hypothesis originates in Goethe's writings, followed by Antoine Berman's claim that only subsequent translations can be truly great (Paloposki and Koskinen 31). However, Paloposki and Koskinen's survey of previous case studies of this phenomenon demonstrates that the hypothesis does not seem to hold water (30). Furthermore, their empirical compilation of a Finnish database of retranslations made it clear that retranslation can be anything "from a slight editing of a previous translation to a completely different text" (37). This is also the case with the Danish retranslations. As explained above, Boisen undertook numerous revisions and only retranslated six out of 18 episodes from scratch.

The ageing cause is however not the only one according to Pym, as the struggle to find the ultimate translation may also be based on competing perceptions of translational norms, especially when it comes to highly complex texts (82). Thus, Pym speaks of 'active' and 'passive' retranslation, where passive retranslation refers to retranslations remote from the source text in time, while active retranslation refers to retranslations which share the same

cultural location or generation, otherwise known as ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ retranslation in Alvstad and Assis Rosa (18). Pym explains:

A comparison between two or more passive retranslations [...] would tend to provide information about historical changes in the target culture [...]. Quite apart from being often redundant (the information thus revealed could have been obtained without doing translation history), such a procedure can only affirm the general hypothesis that target-culture norms determine translation strategies. The comparative analysis of active retranslations, however, tends to locate causes far closer to the translator, especially in the entourage of patrons, publishers, readers and intercultural politics (although clearly not excluding monocultural influences from any side). The study of active retranslations would thus seem better positioned to yield insights into the nature and workings of translation itself, into its own special range of disturbances, without blindly surrendering causality to target-culture norms (83).

Nowhere does Pym define the time range for either of these types of retranslations, but in Boisen’s case, his first translation may be categorised as more or less passive as it is produced 27 years after the publication of the novel. The subsequent retranslations, on the other hand, are active as they take place only few years apart.

What are the motivations, then, behind either passive or active retranslation? Vanderschelden enlists five typical reasons:

1. The existing translation is unsatisfactory and cannot be revised efficiently.
2. A new edition of the ST [source text] is published and becomes the standard reference.
3. The existing TT [target text] is considered outdated from a stylistic point of view.
4. The retranslation has a special function to fill in the TL [target language]
5. A different interpretation of the ST justifies a new translation (4-6).

Some of these reasons may be behind two recent Scandinavian translations, such as a Swedish translation by Erik Andersson, which was published in 2012, and a Danish translation by Karsten Sand Iversen in 2014. Some of these reasons may also be among the motives behind Boisen’s retranslations as the source edition he used had turned out to be unreliable, and as Boisen expresses many concerns with the inadequacy of the first translation, the need to update the style, and that Joyce scholarship had exploded over the years and led to new interpretations of the seminal work. But since most of it was revised, and only some episodes retranslated from square one, Boisen’s self-retranslations are both “assimilative” and “confrontational” (Alvstad and Assis Rosa 10). Such causes reflect Pym’s ‘material’ cause (the source text, technology, etc.) and ‘efficient’ cause (the translator’s preferences) which have received little attention in translation studies (Pym 149). The translator is by far merely a mechanistic abstraction, Pym says, but a person of flesh and blood:

A third kind of translator, by far the least elegant for respectable theorists, is the one that has a material body [...]. In fact, the material body, as a mobile biological unit, is all I really need in order to break with the form of abstract anonymity. [...] A human body does several things. It consumes resources, it affords pleasures and pains, it interrelates and reproduces, and it moves (161).

In the following sections I argue that Boisen's territorial textual imprints in *Ulysses* are in fact bodily as they express pleasures and pains.

### **Voice**

I first refer to voice as the abstract concept of authorial or translational presence in the literary text:

Since the text is the only immediately visible part of the narrative, it is only by studying the language of the text that the style of the author or translator might really be identified and hence the voice(s) present in the discourse be determined. Voice is therefore to be approached through the analysis of style (Munday 19).

Style, on the other hand, is a complex concept. As such, I extend Munday's definition of style to include:

the perceived distinctive manner of expression in writing or speaking, just as there is a perceived manner of doing things, like playing squash or painting. We might talk of someone writing in an 'ornate style', or speaking in a 'comic style' (Wales 371).

Hence, it is through linguistic choices that a certain style is created, and it is the translator's task to perceive the distinctive manner of the distribution and pattern of these choices and recreate them in his or her own language accordingly.

Whether the author's voice tends to dominate in such translation, or whether the translator can be truly heard by perhaps changing the form or meaning of the stylistic items, or perhaps a mix of the two, the outcome will only be revealed to the reader through a comparative analysis: "Any alteration, muffling, exaggeration, blurring, or other distortion of authorial voice will remain hidden until and unless some element of the TT reveals the mediation or until the TT is compared to its ST" (Munday 14). Such alteration or distortion of the authorial voice is exactly what I set out to reveal in my examination of the traceable manifestation of a distinct voice – or territorial imprints – in two cases of Boisen's translations compared to the ST.

The fact that the translator's voice may be seen deliberately in the TT through a blurring of the author's style may give translators some power over the text if they wish to leave their personal fingerprints, or signposts, in the work. The translator turns into an 'unreliable translator' (Munday 14). Hermans proposes that we can see such blurring or alteration at its best when translators have to 'come out of the shadows and directly intervene in a text which the reader had been let to believe spoke only with one voice' (28). This may also be referred to as a kind of "positioning" or "manipulation" of the reader (Boase-Beier 110). Hermans suggests two significant cases of such intervention. First, "the cultural embedding of texts" in the shape of historical or topical references and allusions. Here the translator's voice often disrupts and intervenes to ensure a communicative positioning of the new target audience. Hermans notes "this can lead to hybrid situations in which the discourse offers manifestly redundant or inadequate information, or appears attuned to one type of Reader here and another there, showing the Translator's presence in and through the discordances" (28-29). Second, cases of "untranslatability", such as polysemy and wordplay. As Hermans argues, "sometimes translations run into contradictions and incongruities which challenge the reader's willing suspension of disbelief, or the translated text may call on the explicit intervention of a Translator's Voice through the use of brackets or of notes, and they then remind the reader of this other presence continually stalking a purportedly univocal discourse" (29). Thus, both

cases are situations where the translator steps in to help the reader understand the text. In my comparative textual analysis below, I test the first case of cultural embedding by tracing Boisen's manifestation of his voice through the linguistic choices of his translational style. In the selected samples discussed below, I reflect on how Boisen does not really "come out of the shadow" to help the reader, but rather aims to leave his immortal stamp on the translation.

Since Joyce crafts many styles in *Ulysses*, the exploration of the translator's voice in translation and retranslation becomes more complicated. *Ulysses* is constructed on a poetics of cultural and linguistic hybridity, giving the novel several mixed voices of recreated idiolect, sociolect and dialect. This poetics is based on three factors. First, in Joyce's view, there was no such thing as a fixed Irish identity, for the Irish nation was a vast fabric of diverse cultural traits from all over the world. Second, the English language to which Joyce and his fellow Irishmen had been forced to succumb had to be avenged by revolutionising the words. Third, the resulting hybridity in Joyce's fiction is the fruit of the many cross-cultural encounters Joyce made during his nearly lifelong nomadic exile all over Europe. Thus, Joyce was a keen polyglot and celebrated multilingualism. As such, *Ulysses* is based on the poetics of translational hybridity, foreignization and polyphony as the vast fabric of styles in the novel incorporates an array of foreign words and phrases making the novel a truly multilingual book.

Such hybridity is challenging to translators who operate in a completely different cultural context. Are they to domesticate or foreignize an already foreignized style to the foreign reader, to borrow Venuti's often used terms? According to British translator Fiona Doloughan, "polyvocality", as we may term the principle of Joyce's novel, basically removes:

a necessary hierarchy between the voice of the author and/or characters and the voice of the translator, since the translator is of necessity recontextualising the word which has already been transferred 'from one mouth to another, from one social collective to another, from one generation to another generation' (30).

According to Doloughan, the degree to which the translator's voice can be heard in such recontextualization "will depend partly on the choice of a foreignizing or domesticating translation strategy and partly on the expectations and expertise of the target readership" (32). As shown in my analysis, the translator's voice may also be heard through truly "unreliable" stylistic interventions in the mediation, breaking down the hierarchy of authorial or translational presence in the target text as Boisen retains and advertises the literary work as his home ground. In the sections that follow, I scrutinise Boisen's "contextual voice" in the paratexts and the "textual voice" (Alvstad and Assis Rosa 4) in the translations themselves.

### **The paratexts**

In Boisen's 1949 translation, no foreword, introduction, notes or any exterior text had been included. The translation speaks for itself. However, in the 1970 retranslation, Boisen added a number of items. First, a list of episode titles (list of contents) with a note explaining that even though Joyce in the last moment decided to abandon the inclusion of these titles in the publication, Boisen nevertheless decided to include them in the present list since the international Joyce scholars constantly refer to them. Second, an eight-page long preface and a one-page list of last-minute corrections. Third, a 13-page addendum containing mostly translations of Latin references in the novel. Boisen explains that the translations are primarily based on Weldon Thornton's book *Allusions in Joyce* (first published in 1961). The 1986 edition contains reprinted paratexts, along with two more pages clearly signalled as additions to the 1970 preface; and a 2-page afterword apologising for having consistently used the Random House edition of *Ulysses* rather than the new critical and synoptic Hans Walter Gabler

edition from 1984 as it “is mainly aimed at scholars of literature and language” (my back-translation). By doing so, Boisen clearly sends the signal that he is no philologist.

I now turn to the two versions of the preface. Boisen opens his introduction with the assertion that the first translation was well received by the critics and that it has sold well, so why retranslate only two decades later? He explains that the new translation now appears in such a revised form that it might be called a retranslation, while maintaining that the first translation is still generally acceptable [“acceptabel”]. Yet, *Ulysses* called for a second try to allow the translator to make stylistic changes “which makes the text’s rhythm and structure more in correlation with the original”; and to tighten the web of leitmotifs “which is essential to an understanding of the book and to its aesthetic phenotype” (Boisen in Joyce 1970, 9, my back-translation). Boisen argues that the 10,000 changes he made did not change the meaning of the text.

Boisen then lists several more detailed reasons for undertaking this task. First, the 20-year span of intensive translation tasks had given him new insights into English words and their frequency. Since every word in Joyce’s work carries so much weight, Boisen’s urge to invite his readers into this newfound knowledge became so persistent over the years that “one day this feeling became so strong that it had to be released in action” (Boisen in Joyce 1970, 9, my translation). This makes him appear as a considerate and dedicated translator. Second, the Danish language, especially colloquial language, has developed to such a degree, mainly influenced by journalism, advertising, radio and television (which he bemoans) and by American English and Swedish, that a retranslation is required. Boisen has no regard for slang, though, which only blossoms for a short while leaving the reader with an “embarrassingly false” [“pinligt forlorne”, my back-translation] impression. Are we, then, to assume that Boisen has not improved this side of the language? Third, in 1949 the international ethical-literary debate about *Ulysses* had silenced, and this also manifested in the space of Danish reviews, Boisen laments. Only one reviewer was exhilarated by the Danish publication. Since then, Joyce scholarship has expanded enormously and thus prompted new interpretations of the novel. Boisen tried to keep abreast with all the developments, especially with Weldon Thornton’s *Allusions in Ulysses* and Miles L. Hanley’s *Word Index to James Joyce’s Ulysses* (1937). Boisen claims that he managed to successfully solve many of the puzzles that German and French translators had not (Boisen in Joyce 1970, 11). Every time a new enigma has been explained, it might result in new textual changes, such as the replacement of a comma, a different word order, etc. This portrays Boisen as a translator tormented by a reverse “anxiety of influence” (Koskinen and Paloposki 25), which indicates his fear that he may have not been sufficiently influenced by the new ground in Joyce studies. Boisen was obsessed with getting the leitmotifs right. In the process of his first translation of *Ulysses* he created a box of index cards with leitmotifs accompanied by page references. This box is now owned by the Danish James Joyce Society. I had the pleasure of inspecting the box myself, but sadly it is not as impressive as Boisen himself seemed to indicate in the preface, where he asserts that it is probably the most exhaustive index of leitmotifs there is worldwide. The compilation however is rather meagre. Boisen also claims that Hanley’s index did help him with “a few (and minor) extra ones” (my back-translation). Fourth, the source text edition of the translations is the erroneous Random House edition, so for the copyediting process of the retranslation, he managed to get hold of the 1939 Odyssey Press edition, which, he claims, was arguably the best edition at the time. Boisen clearly goes to great length to accomplish an excellent index. Fifth, the revision also enabled him to make use of recent Danish translations of the Bible and Shakespeare’s works to improve all such allusions, despite the fact that the selected Danish Shakespeare translation is not really that good, as Boisen deplores in an afterthought (Boisen in Joyce 1970, 15).

After such lengthy explanations, Boisen apologises for the inclusion of the preface in his translation. He would have preferred that the translation speak for itself, but he felt he owed the ten thousand readers of his first translation, as he himself puts it, a full explanation of the translation process. In the same preface Boisen also acknowledged a few people, including the well-known Joyce scholar Fritz Senn from The James Joyce Foundation in Zürich. The acknowledgement is followed by a short reader's guide to understanding *Ulysses* and a few words about the book cover. Boisen notes that the first three episodes are the most difficult to translate, and he invites readers to consult several international biographies and reference works to assist with the understanding of the work.

The 1980 addendum to the preface says that Boisen can obviously never finish the job since he has learnt more English by translating approximately 150 books in the decade, and since more enigmas have been solved, primarily in the publication of Gifford and Seidman's seminal *Notes for Joyce* (1974) which later became *Ulysses Annotated*. The translator discovered "without gloating" that even this majestic work has not been able to solve more than one hundred puzzles in the novel (Boisen in Joyce 1986, 15, my back-translation). Boisen then deplores the many typos in the 1970 version, and if there are any translation errors at all, it is no surprise since the British Joyce scholars also disagree on the meaning of certain words. Finally, Boisen declares that he does not know whether this is the ultimate translation. It has been his duty to research this incredibly fascinating book, and if the reader detects any flaws, Boisen can only humbly say "*Ultra posse nemo obligatur*" ["No one is obligated beyond what he is able to do", my translation] (Boisen in Joyce 1986, 16).

Boisen does indeed apply all of Vanderschelden's five typical reasons for retranslation in translators' prefaces - the existing translations are unsatisfactory; a different edition of *Ulysses* has been used; the first translation appears outdated; the new translation has a function to fill in the target language; and the growing industry of Joyce scholarship has provided new insight into the work. Thus, Boisen appears as a translator truly dedicated to helping his reader understand Joyce's complex work. Boisen not only fulfils Joyce's wish for his readers to dedicate themselves to his works as long as they live, but also aims to keep up with the conclusions of the studies on Joyce to avoid embarrassment when readers might come to see his shortcomings as a philologist. Clearly, the translator's process has been an experience of both pains and pleasures, as Pym refers to above. My impression of him as a translator with double standards corresponds with the findings in Klitgård in which direct plagiarism from the German and Swedish translations is documented – unfortunate sloppy short cuts, too, as he actually plagiarises the other translators' gross errors which he should have been able to detect (128-31). Thus, Boisen manipulates his reader: the both openly supportive and self-congratulatory nature of his voice in the paratexts makes him come between the author and the reader to profit from the task, and in this way, it is uncertain to whom he actually feels allegiance in the entire translation project: Joyce or the Danish reader. And in this way, he appears as an unreliable translator.

### **The text**

In the analysis below of two unparalleled cases in the translations of 1949, 1970 and 1980/1986, Boisen makes his mark by way of visual and auditory imprints. The samples are two instances of cultural embedding, that is, historical and topical references and allusions in the text, as suggested by Hermans.

The cases do, however, not show Boisen as a translator who steps in to secure the reader's understanding of the text, as Hermans explained. Boisen "comes out of the shadow" (Hermans 28) to take it upon himself to add rather than solve a riddle in *Ulysses*. In the first

case from the episode “Aeolus” we are presented with the following humorous parody of newspaper headlines as they might have looked in antiquity:

SOPHIST WALLOPS HAUGHTY HELEN SQUARE  
ON PROBOSCIS. SPARTANS GNASH MOLARS.  
ITHICANS VOW PEN IS CHAMP

(Joyce 1986: 7.1032-34)

Boisen translates and retranslates the headlines into:

SOFIST STANGER HOVMODIGE HELENE ÉN  
LIGE PAA TUDEN. SPARTANERE SKÆRER  
KINDTÆNDER. PEN FAVORIT HOS ITHACA

[Sophist hits haughty Helen right on the nose. Spartans grind their molars. Pen favourite with Ithaca, my back-translation]

(Joyce 1949 154; 1970 146)

Sofist stanger hovmodige Elena én  
lige på tuden. Spartanere skærer  
kindtænder. Pen er kåret favorit hos Ithaca

[Sophist hits haughty Elena right on the nose. Spartans grind their molars. Pen has been elected favourite with Ithaca, my back-translation]

(Joyce 1980/1986 180)

Besides the minor communicative change in the last headline, the domestication of “proboscis” into “tuden” [nose/conk] and the uncalled-for visual and auditory changing of capitals to lower case (the loudness has been downplayed), the most striking change here is the substitution of Helen of Troy [“Helene” in Danish] with Elena. Who is she? I propose that it is a secret reference to Boisen’s wife Elena Stoiloff of Bulgarian-Turkish descent who died in 1984. The present reader may wince, but I see no other explanation so far, and my proposition will be supported in the next case. In this fashion, Boisen really tears down the hierarchy between author, translator and reader. As Hermans pointed out, “This can lead to hybrid situations in which the discourse offers manifestly redundant or inadequate information, or appears attuned to one type of Reader here and another there, showing the Translator’s presence in and through the discordances” (28-29). In short, in his last translation, Boisen comes between the author and the reader to speak on his own behalf in his own territory and presumably derives pleasure or thrill from the situation. But this is not all.

The flower motif in *Ulysses* is under scrutiny - a leitmotif Boisen was careful to note in his index cards (Klitgård 2007, Klitgård 2012). In the episode of “Lotus Eaters” the protagonist Leopold Bloom is about to immerse himself in a hot bath. I have italicized and back translated the significant phrase of study here:

He foresaw his pale body reclined in it at full, naked, in a womb of warmth, oiled by scented melting soap, softly laved. He saw his trunk and limbs riprippled over and sustained, buoyed lightly upward, lemonyellow: his navel, bud of flesh: and saw the dark tangled curls of his bush floating, floating hair of the stream around *the limp father of thousands*, a languid floating flower.

(Joyce 1986 562-72)



Boisen translates this as follows:

I aanden saa han sin blege krop ligge lænet tilbage i det, nøgen, i et skød af varme, salvet af duftende, smeltende sæbe, blidt beskyllet. Han saa sin krop og sine lemmer sagte overrislet og baaret oppe, let opadstræbende, citrongule: hans navle, en kødknop: og saa de mørke, filtrede lokker i haarene svæve, strømmens svævende haar om *den slappe tusindfader* [the limp father of thousands], en træg, svævende blomst (Joyce 1949 91).

Han forudså sit blege legeme liggende fuldt udstrakt i det, nøgent, i et skød af varme, salvet af duftende, smeltende sæbe, blidt beskyllet. Han så sin krop og sine lemmer omrislet og båret oppe, løftet let opad af opdrift, citrongul. Hans navle en kødblomst. Og så buskens mørke filtrede krøller flyde, flydende hår af strømmen om *den slappe tusindfader* [the limp father of thousands] [and in the 1980/1986 retranslation this reference is translated into the word *bimbaschi* as the only alteration], en træg flydende blomst.

(Joyce 1970 91; Joyce 1980/1986 109)

The 1949 and 1970 translations are direct translations of “the limp father of thousands” which, at first, reads as a description of Bloom’s penis in the water, but it is in fact also a culturally embedded reference to the common houseplant called ‘mother of thousands’ (*Saxifraga*) which spreads its runners that seem to float in flowers (Gifford and Seidman 100; Thornton 88). Thornton also refers to Thomas Inman’s *Ancient Faiths Embodied in Ancient Names* (1868-69) in which it says: “Whilst attending hospital practice in London, I heard a poor Irishman apostrophise his diseased organ as ‘You father of thousands’”, and he adds that it simply might have been a common term in Dublin at the time. As in the “Aeolus” episode, Boisen chooses to circumvent things in the 1980/1986 translation by exchanging “tusindfader” [father of thousands] with the most peculiar “bimbaschi”.

Fagerberg refers to a talk given by Boisen at Copenhagen University where Boisen explicitly says that this a greeting from him to his reader, and a greeting from him to his wife Elena whose father had been an officer in the Bulgarian army often stationed abroad (40). Fagerberg searched for the term and discovered that there was no such word in Bulgarian. Instead, in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* he found the definition: ‘bimbash’i - Turkish military captain or commander; British officer in Egyptian service. (Turk. = head of a thousand)’ (40). Also, Mikkelsen notes that Boisen told her personally that ‘bimbaschi’ not only means military commander, but also ‘penis’. According to Boisen, ‘bimbaschi’ was once his nickname in the army (82). Finally, Povlsen suggests that this intervention puts Boisen in Bloom’s place, by identifying himself and his wife Elena with Bloom and his wife Molly in the novel (4).

This is a rather anarchistic visual intervention in the source text indeed, but Joyce might have approved of such recklessness. Boisen inserts an enigma as a territorial signpost rather than solving one for the reader, which signals that he is not as helpful as his self-image in the paratexts would have it. As in “Aeolus”, he adds to the polyvocality by positioning himself between Joyce and the Danish reader in order to speak with his own voice, resulting in a highly manipulated and thus “unreliable” and “hybrid” passage with misleading information to the reader who is looking to understand Joyce’s universe. Instead, Boisen retains his turf as an alpha male exposing his male organ to secure his personal mate Elena’s and his own immortality.

## Conclusion

So why did Boisen revise and retranslate *Ulysses* several times? What were his reasons? As my study suggests, translating the novel became a life-long obsession with him, perfectly on a par with Joyce's dictum opening this article. Even though Boisen implies in the 1986 afterword that he is neither a literary person nor a linguist, he seems nevertheless obsessed to such a degree that his own life and even that of his wife materialised in bodily form and manifested themselves in the identities of the main characters of the work, thus positioning the reader. The slightly conceited preface and his subsequent public explanations of "bimbaschi" as a greeting to his reader and his wife suggest that he is a somewhat unreliable translator even though these are two singular *ad hoc* cases. "What is the art of living? Not to miss anything", he said (193). In his last self-retranslation, in at least two cases which I have been able to detect, he certainly comes out of the shadows by distancing himself from the translator's voice of the first translations in the creation of a foreignized and culturally embedded voice of his own - and in this way he actually fathers a cross-cultural and multilingual hybridity which I have demonstrated is a cornerstone trait of Joyce's poetics. To conclude, even though Boisen's intentions may appear self-conceited, he in fact happens to contribute to the enduring enigmas and puzzles which Joyce had secured in his work - "and that's the only way of insuring one's immortality", as Joyce himself put it (Joyce in Ellmann 521).

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## Identifying and Translating Orality in Literature: an Italian-English case study

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### Abstract

The translation of dialogue and oral varieties of language in literature is an understudied avenue. This article explains the strategies and reasoning behind the translation of the orality in the short story *Concorso* by Ingy Mubiayi, translated from Italian to English. *Concorso* addresses issues of immigration, identity, bureaucracy and family in a style marked with orality and humour, firmly situated in an Italian context. The ways in which written versions of an oral Italian variety can be reproduced in English are shown through context-based examples, approached through a source-oriented translation lens.

### Introduction

Reproducing orality is an understudied aspect of literary translation. While audio-visual translation is predominantly concerned with dialogue, with its particular limitations, marked orality occurs frequently in literary texts and presents its own translation issues. When I translated the short story *Concorso* (which I titled *The Examination*) by Ingy Mubiayi into English, one of the most significant challenges was recreating the colloquial, casual style throughout both the narration and the dialogue. While literary translation does not have to be concerned about character limits and timing like subtitling, there are no audio-visual cues like location, costume and sound to indicate the cultural context of a text, only the author's words.

*Concorso* is the story of a girl named Hayat, who is Arab, Italian and culturally Muslim. She is contemplating her future career options in Italian bureaucracy, and going to the police station to seek career advice, when she is obliged to help another Arab woman named Aziza, whose son has gone missing. Hayat's sister and mother both get involved in trying to find Ibrahim, the son, traversing Rome, negotiating with other migrants in outer-city neighbourhoods, and eventually going to find Ibrahim in the nearby town of Frascati.

*Concorso*'s main themes are identity, family relationships, the situation of migrants in Italy and society's attitudes towards them. Mubiayi uses both orality and humour to convey them to her readers. The colloquial first-person style creates the effect that readers are being told a story by the narrator, who directly expresses her thoughts and feelings about the events occurring, and shows us the world of the story through her eyes (Bernardelli and Ceserani 83). The orality of *Concorso* is achieved through register, discourse markers, and morphosyntactical organisation, identified as the neo-standard variety of Italian with elements of the colloquial form (Berruto, *Sociolinguistica Dell'italiano Contemporaneo* 152–53).

My macro strategy for this translation was source-oriented, sometimes also known as foreignization, from Venuti's seminal work (Venuti). This means that I aimed to keep as closely to the source text (ST) as possible, retaining culture-specific references and terms where appropriate. In terms of the orality in the text, identifying the variety of Italian used and rendering it in equivalent terms, without giving Mubiayi's characters a falsified, region-specific sociolect was integral to the strategy.

### **Studies of orality in literary translation**

In the 1980s, Berman wrote of the “deforming tendencies” in translation, which he felt were identifiable techniques, used “largely unconsciously,” to assimilate STs to the target language (TL) and culture. For orality particularly, Berman identified “ennoblement” as producing a target text (TT) more elegant than the original, simplifying it and removing any perceived “clumsiness,” arguing this shows disrespect for the ST. He also advised against translating vernaculars by transferring them into a vernacular of the TL, to “exoticize” it, as doing so “ridicules” the original (Berman 250). He does point out vernaculars and differences in language can be distinguished in translation, providing the example of the French translation of Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, but only names them as “varieties” of French, not specifying further (Berman 252).

Cavagnoli discusses the importance of maintaining orality in translation, focusing on repetition in literary texts, specifically from English to Italian. In example passages she demonstrates how some authors use repetition for impact, flow and style in their writing, and so the tendency to synonymise in translation is detrimental. Ignoring markers of orality means changing the intentions behind the text (Cavagnoli 38–41).

Assis Rosa, in an analytical study, examines orality used to indicate sociocultural status, particularly marginality, arguing that it changes a target reader’s impression of a text and its characters (Assis Rosa 222). She identifies three strategies historically used to translate orality: normalisation, centralisation, and decentralisation, all detrimental to the perception of the text. Normalisation translates marked discourse as standard, centralisation turns “less prestigious” discourse more prestigious, but still non-standard, and decentralisation turns standard discourse less prestigious (Assis Rosa 214). Focusing on Portuguese translations of Charles Dickens’ work, Assis Rosa finds that most translations have normalised orality, removing the impression of “otherness” that distinguishes characters in the ST. If orality is not maintained, the characterisation and distinction between characters and narrator is eliminated and gives target readers a different impression of the text.

Gadd Colombi also discusses needing to make careful choices when translating orality to maintain sociolects present in the ST. Understanding the construction of a character’s sociolect in the source language (SL) allows the translator to make choices that render it correctly in the TL. While smoothing over orality is detrimental, it is equally important to not make it too informal or use uncommon or archaic words and expressions, unless present in the ST. Similarly, when there is lexical variation in the orality of the ST, but the TL does not offer as many appropriate alternatives, the translator must employ creative strategies to not ignore this in the TT (Colombi 63-65).

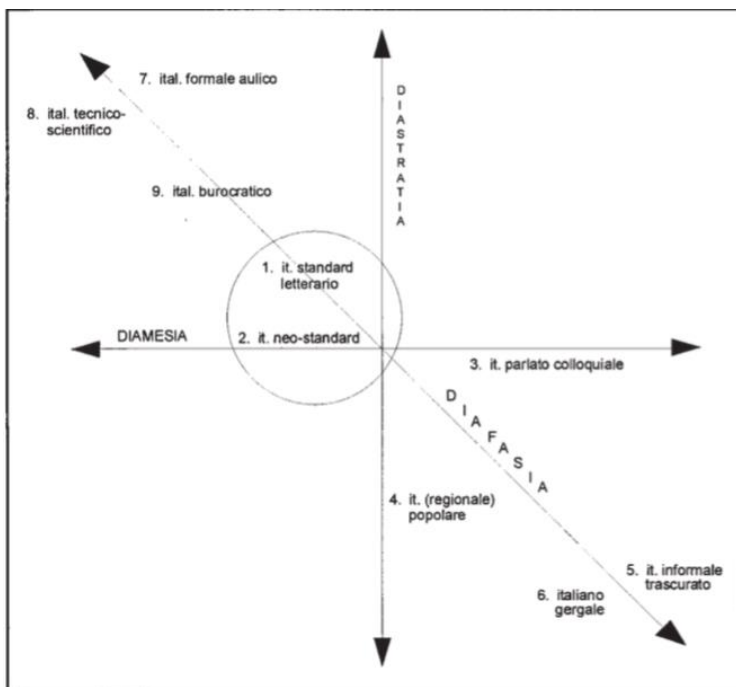
In 2004, Spunta published a comprehensive study of representations of orality in Italian literature from the 1970s to the 1990s. It explores how orality has manifested in literature alongside the development of new forms of communication and media, such as email and television. She asserts that orality and literacy exist on a continuum, not as a dichotomy, citing Berruto’s work as the basis, and identifies neo-standard Italian as the variety used by many writers in Italian literature (Spunta 300–01). Spunta’s research does not come from a translation perspective, but the features of orality in Italian are described through analysis of a variety of authors, giving points of reference for translation.

### **Analysing orality in *Concorso***

To identify the variety of language in this story, Berruto’s continuum of Italian most accurately encompasses the range found within the language (Berruto, *Sociolinguistica Dell’italiano Contemporaneo* 21). The three axes of his continuum are:

1. **The diastratic:** the social and educational characteristics of the speaker.
2. **The diaphasic:** the situation and level of formality being used.
3. **The diamesic:** the communicative medium.

This covers all possible registers, situations and methods the language is used in, and describes the kind of language used by any given speaker. While there are other models proposed, such as the ones proposed by Sabatini (1985) and Sanga (1981), Berruto's is the most comprehensive and flexible. Berruto's continuum provides the analytical framework to identify the variety or varieties of language present in the text, which is the point of departure for determining how to emulate the style in translation. Initial analysis indicates the text employs orality in its narrative style, and so the research focuses on literature concerning features of orality in Italian and the translation of orality.



**Figure 1** Berruto's continuum of the Italian language (Tosi 42).

While there are brief examples of other varieties in *Concorso*, only the main one will be analysed in detail. This variety encompasses both Hayat's narration and the majority of the dialogue between characters familiar to each other, namely Hayat's sister, her mother, and her friends. The variety and register Mubiayi uses reflects what Berruto identified as "neo-standard" Italian, with elements of colloquial Italian, particularly in dialogue (Berruto,

*Sociolinguistica Dell'italiano Contemporaneo* 139–52). This is consistent with Spunta's finding in *Voicing the Word* that authors use different elements of neo-standard Italian to situate their writing on the continuum between literacy and orality, blurring the traditional distinction between spoken and written varieties of language (Spunta 295–96). Mubiayi's style is not experimental, as she does not include markers of *italiano parlato-parlato* ("spoken-spoken Italian") such as pauses, repetition and incomplete sentences, but uses discourse markers and a register that gives the sense of story being told orally without getting in the way of retelling the events in a logical, clear manner (Berruto, "Varietà Diamesiche, Diastratiche, Diafasiche" 43–44). The whole story is also either in present tense or *passato prossimo* (past perfect), rather than the more traditional *passato remoto* (remote past) used in Italian literature for narration. This distinction cannot be shown through tense choices in English, as its past tense options, present perfect and simple past, do not share the same functions as the two Italian past tenses and are commonly used in both spoken and written English (Kinder and Savini 393–94).

Mubiayi uses elements of oral, colloquial Italian to give readers a sense that we are hearing Hayat's thoughts as they flow, being told the story directly with all her true thoughts and feelings, rather than through a third-person, omniscient narrator. While for the most part her narration flows logically, and there are a few instances of syntactic dislocation in either

narration or dialogue, the register is casual, and she uses colloquial expressions and markers as if she were relaying the story to someone in real time. This lessens the perceived distance between the readers and Hayat, especially effective in reinforcing the Italian (“nat[a] e cresciut[a] a Roma,” “born and raised in Rome,” (Mubiayi 111)<sup>1</sup> part of her identity. Below I explain the reasoning behind my choices, as I tried to strike a balance between being true to the source text, and creating a similar, natural style of orality in my translation that did not remove all traces of her Italianness.

### Recreating orality in translation

Throughout *Concorso*, Hayat’s long, flowing sentences, while common in Italian in general, make for difficult reading in English at some points. I chose to use contractions throughout my translation, not just in dialogue but also in Hayat’s narration (“don’t” instead of “do not”; “I’m” instead of “I am”), to help imitate this flow, even when sentences had to be split in English for readability. This also helped recreate the casual register of neo-standard Italian Mubiayi uses. The only exception to this rule was in some cases where Mubiayi has included stressed pronouns (such as *io* (I) or *tu* (you)) for emphasis in front of conjugated verbs, or rare occasions where the text called for more emphasis in English and using an uncontracted form of the verb allowed me to render this in translation. Contractions are a major signifier of colloquial registers of English, and so this was a choice made on the macro level to maintain that overarching tone in translation (Heim 462).

### Discourse markers

One of the ways Mubiayi imitates orality in the text is through discourse markers; she frequently uses words that serve to stress and articulate meaning, but have little semantic value (Gaetano Berruto, *Sociolinguistica Dell’italiano Contemporaneo* 146). While many of these markers of neo-standard and colloquial Italian have direct equivalents in English, they often sound unnatural as they do not fit the flow or have the same colloquial meanings contained in one word like in Italian. Therefore, a direct translation of many of these terms is not sufficient or could even be detrimental to recreating Mubiayi’s style in translation.

According to Berruto, semantically “poor” connectives signal colloquial Italian or *italiano parlato*. Tosi then divided these connectives into five categories: to preface remarks (1), gain time (2), emphasise consequences (3), negotiate meaning (4), and seek agreement or sympathy (5). The discourse markers that frequently appear in this text are listed accordingly below (Tosi 53).

<b>(1)</b> <i>magari</i> <b><i>mica</i></b> <i>niente</i> <b><i>ma</i></b> <b><i>vabbè</i></b>	<b>(2)</b> <b><i>cioè</i></b> <i>così</i> <i>ecco</i> <b><i>insomma</i></b>	<b>(3)</b> <i>non so</i> <i>(mi) sembra</i> <i>probabilmente</i>	<b>(4)</b> <b><i>sì</i></b> <b><i>certo</i></b> <i>vero?</i>	<b>(5)</b> <i>guarda</i> <i>eh(i)</i> <i>sai</i> <i>dai</i> <i>scusa</i> <i>capito?</i>
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Some of these markers have equivalents that work well in colloquial English. For instance, “scusa” is easily rendered as “sorry” in a colloquial register, and “vero?” as “really?” or a tag question. In this article, however, I focus on the terms (bolded in the list above) that I found

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<sup>1</sup> All translations my own unless otherwise stated.



most difficult to render in English, either because their meaning does not correspond easily, or the English equivalent does not fit the casual register and explain how I compromised or compensated to keep the effects of Mubiayi’s style. As Umberto Eco wrote, “...sapendo che non si dice mai la stessa cosa, si possa dire quasi la stessa cosa”. - “...knowing one can never say the same thing, one can say almost the same thing,” (Eco 10). These examples are only potential renderings of these phrases; I attempt to contextualise my choices in accordance with the text, in the hope it offers ideas for other translators who face this kind of situation.

***mica***

*Mica* is difficult to render because it is a negation adverb that is standalone marker of colloquial Italian and can take on several meanings in English, depending on context, most of which are neutral when translated on their own (Kinder and Savini 286–87). It is most commonly translated as “not”, but like the Italian *non*, this is a standard, neutral translation. By using *mica*, Mubiayi is signalling the casual register Hayat is using in both her narration and dialogue. In lines where *mica* is part of a question, there is no way in English to use something other than a neutral negative construction. Instead, to compensate, I added tag questions to the negative statements to render the effect of a more conversational way of constructing questions in English, as shown below:

<b>Italian</b>	<b>Literal translation</b>	<b>My translation</b>
«Magda! <b>Mica</b> vorrai entrare lì dentro?».	“Magda! You don’t want to go in there?”	“Magda! You <b>don’t really</b> want to go in there, <b>do you?</b> ”
«... <b>Mica</b> siete dei servizi sociali?».	“You’re not from social services?”	“You’re not from social services, <b>are you?</b> ”
Non sarà <b>mica</b> arrivata l’ora x?	Hour X won’t have arrived?	<b>Surely</b> Hour X hasn’t arrived?

Without the addition of the “really” and “do you?” added in the first example, the translation is a very neutral statement that is devoid of both the disbelief Hayat is expressing to her sister, and the casual tone she employs. Likewise, despite just meeting the girls, the old man is suddenly very casual when he is worried they have come to take Ibrahim away, and the literal translation makes his question sound neutral or even polite. I did not add a tag question to the last instance, since it was not part of dialogue, and “surely” better conveys Hayat’s tone of disbelief that there is activity in the bathroom at home.

In statements, “not” or “at all” are again neutral constructions that do not capture the tone; to compensate I added other adverbs for emphasis in the following cases:

<b>Italian</b>	<b>Literal translation</b>	<b>My translation</b>
<b>Mica</b> perché sono nera devo per forza essere impegnata.	Because I’m black I don’t have to necessarily be engaged.	<b>Just</b> because I’m black I don’t necessarily have to be an activist.
Per esempio, <b>mica</b> si può più parlare al bagno.	For example, one can’t speak in the bathroom.	For example, you <b>just</b> can’t speak in the bathroom <b>anymore</b> .

Poi la libreria al bagno non serve <b>mica</b> .	Plus the bookshelf in the bathroom isn't needed.	Besides, the bookshelf in the bathroom isn't <b>even</b> needed <b>anyway</b> .
«In commissariato non c'è <b>mica</b> gente che ti può sostituire così <i>d'amblee...</i> »	“At the police station there's not any people who can substitute you so quickly...”	“At the police station there's <b>just not</b> anyone <b>at all</b> who can replace you so <i>immediate-mont...</i> ”
«Chiamiamo i carabinieri! È il loro lavoro! <b>Mica</b> quello di una banda di pazzi disadattati come noi.»	“Let's call the <i>carabinieri</i> ! It's their job! Not one for a group of crazy misfits like us.”	“Let's call the <i>carabinieri</i> ! It's their job! <b>Definitely not</b> one for a gang of crazy misfits like us.”

In the instances above, I have added adverbs that do not exaggerate the negation that *mica* signals and have adapted them to the context of each sentence. For example, while “just” is a frequently recurring compensation, in the last example “just not” would not fit the context of Hayat exclaiming how ill-suited their group is to the rescue mission, but “definitely not” expresses the exasperation in her statement. In my translation of the second last example («In commissariato non c'è **mica** gente che ti può sostituire così *d'amblee...*»), I chose to change the French word in translation to one more recognisable to an English speaker, so that the joke of the policeman attempting to sound smart was not lost on Anglophone readers. Mubiayi has spelled the word phonetically in Italian, and so I have done the same in English.

### *cioè*

I found that the literal meaning of *cioè*, “that is,” was too stilted or formal for the register I was aiming to create in English. Once again, one alternative to suit the tone did not fit all contexts, but two seemed to fit most cases:

<b>Italian</b>	<b>Literal translation</b>	<b>My translation</b>
<b>Cioè</b> io parlavo...	That is I talked...	<b>Well</b> I talked...
...perché a casa sei autorizzato a vestire «in borghese», <b>cioè</b> a capo scoperto...	...because at home you are authorised to dress “in plain clothes”, that is with your head uncovered...	...because at home you're allowed to dress “in civvies,” <b>as in</b> with your head uncovered...
<b>Cioè</b> , va inteso tutto così letteralmente?	That is, is it intended so literally?	<b>As in</b> , does it have to be understood that literally?
<b>Cioè</b> , stava tutto il tempo lì...[?]	That is, was he there all the time...[?]	<b>As in</b> , was he there all the time...[?]

Quelli che conosco, <b>cioè</b> con cui ho scambiato qualche chiacchiera...	Those I know, that is with whom I have exchanged a few words...	Those I know, <b>well</b> those I've exchanged a few words with...
...e non avessi questo cognome che comincia per <i>Abd</i> , <b>cioè</b> servo...	...and if I didn't have this surname that starts with <i>Abd</i> , that is, "servant"...	...and I didn't have this surname that starts with <i>Abd</i> , <b>as in</b> 'servant'...
«Sì, <b>cioè</b> no.»	"Yes, that is, no."	"Yes, <b>well</b> , no."
...cosa sono riuscita a capire: <b>cioè</b> niente.	...what I have managed to understand: that is, nothing.	...what I've managed to understand: <b>that is</b> , nothing.
<b>Cioè</b> in un campo nomadi.	That is, into a nomad camp.	<b>As in</b> , into a nomad camp.
...alla base, <b>cioè</b> a casa loro.	...to the base, that is, their house.	to base camp, <b>as in</b> to their house.

"As in" is the lower register equivalent of "that is" in most cases where Hayat is expanding on what she means or explaining a word or phrase, and I chose "well" in the cases where she is retracting what she has just stated. I used the literal "that is" where it fit the emphatic flow of the sentence, to show she understands nothing.

### *insomma*

*Insomma* literally means "in summary," but is more commonly used as a filler or connector word to signal that the speaker is summing up the essential information they want to convey. Its pragmatic meaning is closer to "so" in English, which does fit in some cases, but is still a neutral construction that does not convey as much of a casual tone in every situation, especially if the rest of the sentence in Italian does not contain any other markers of orality (Kinder and Savini 439–42).

<b>Italian</b>	<b>Literal translation</b>	<b>My translation</b>
<b>Insomma</b> , siamo musulmane.	In summary, we are Muslim.	<b>I mean</b> , we are Muslim.
<b>Insomma</b> non si poteva pensare troppo a quello che c'era scritto nel «Libro»...	In summary, what was written in the "Book" could not be thought of too much...	<b>Basically</b> , they couldn't think about what was written in the "Book" too much...
<b>Insomma</b> , il nostro signor bagno è corredato di...	In summary, our excellent bathroom is furnished with...	<b>So</b> our top-notch bathroom is furnished with...
<b>Insomma</b> , io credo che si possa lavorare per migliorare la giustizia terrena...	In summary, I believe that one can work to improve earthly justice...	<b>Basically</b> , I believe that you can work to improve earthly justice...
<b>Insomma</b> , tutto quel fervore, quel modo di parlare...	In summary, all that fervour, that way of talking...	<b>Basically</b> , all that fervour, that way of talking...

<b>Insomma</b> , l'unico risultato è...	In summary, the sole result is...	<b>So</b> the only result is...
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The three options I have used in English all serve the same pragmatic purpose of summarising or listing information. In most cases, “basically” fit the more casual tone, and so I used it when Hayat is explaining her thoughts or a situation to the readers. The “I mean” in the first example better fits Hayat’s tone and the way she is comparing her and her sister’s thoughts and beliefs. The two instances of “so” were to reflect the filler quality in Italian, because “basically” is less of a filler in English and more of a signal of summary.

### *certo*

*Certo* is used to both express agreement or highlight something the speaker thinks is a given within the context (Kinder and Savini 441). It is mainly used with this function when Hayat is expressing something she thinks is obvious, particularly when she is being sarcastic.

<b>Italian</b>	<b>Literal translation</b>	<b>My translation</b>
<b>Certo</b> , di lasciare il motorino lì non mi va per niente.	Certainly, leaving the scooter there I don’t feel like at all.	<b>Of course</b> , I don’t feel like leaving the scooter there at all.
<b>Certo</b> , vallo a dire all'assicurazione che l'ho lasciato nella terra di nessuno!	Certainly, go tell the insurance company that I left it in the land of no-one.	<b>Oh sure</b> , go tell the insurance company that I left it in no-man’s land!

The first example is Hayat signalling she is about to say something she thinks is obvious, but she has no other option, and “of course” is more colloquial than “certainly” in this instance. I added an “oh” at the beginning of the second example because the sarcasm is less obvious in English without it. *Certo*, when followed up by a sarcastic remark evokes a certain intonation in an Italian reader’s mind, and “oh sure” rendered this connotation more effectively in English.

### *sì*

Another choice I had to consider was the translation of *sì*. In standard Italian, there is only one way to express “yes” when there are multiple variations in English, such as “yeah,” or “yep,” which signal colloquial register. Since this is a major marker of colloquial register in English, it felt appropriate to change the following instances of *sì* in the source text to “yeah” or another form of agreement where “yes” sounded stilted.

<b>Italian</b>	<b>Literal translation</b>	<b>My translation</b>
« <b>Sì</b> , sto bene, non ti preoccupare.»...	“Yes, I’m fine, don’t worry.”	“ <b>Yeah</b> , I’m okay, don’t worry.”
«Che è successo? Stai bene, <b>sì</b> ?».	“What has happened? You’re well, yes?”	“What’s happened? You’re okay, <b>right</b> ?”

In the first instance, Hayat is quickly reassuring her sister on the phone, so “yeah” instead of “yes” felt more appropriate in English. In the second instance, “yes?” at the end of a sentence sounds very formal in English, but “yeah?” tends to be only used in certain regions, and I did

not want to give my translation a particular vernacular, which would disrespect the ST and jar readers (Berman 250). “Right?” is more natural but regionally neutral.

### **ma**

The use of *ma* in colloquial Italian, particularly at the start of sentences or clauses, is difficult to translate as it is often a filler or signals the introduction of a question. As a filler, it has little semantic value, close to “um” or “er” in English. With questions, it can literally mean “but do you...?”, however this can sound unnatural or formal in English. It is versatile as a connective, and so requires different words of a similar register in English.

<b>Italian</b>	<b>Literal translation</b>	<b>My translation</b>
«Abbi pazienza, <b>ma</b> lo sai cosa farebbero i carabinieri?».	“Be patient, but do you know what the <i>Carabinieri</i> would do?”	“Hang on, ‘ <b>cause</b> you know what the <i>Carabinieri</i> would do?”
«Yaya - così mi chiamano affettuosamente gli intimi – <b>ma</b> ci fai o ci sei?».	“Yaya – as my closest affectionately call me – but are you stupid or just pretending?”	“Yaya,” – as my nearest and dearest affectionately call me – “are you being stupid or <b>what?</b> ”
<b>Ma</b> che ne sa questo ragazzino?	But what does this little boy know about it?	What does this little boy know <b>anyway?</b>

In these examples, they all served as introductions to questions, but all required different choices to both render them natural to English orality and make sense grammatically. The second example is an example of emphatic use, and so I chose to put an emphatic “or what?” at the end of the English sentence instead.

### **vabbè**

*Vabbè* is a contraction of *va bene*, meaning “okay” or “all right”, and is often used in colloquial spoken Italian. Mubiayi’s use of the contraction instead of the full phrase is a key marker of orality early in the text. The closest equivalent of the contraction in English would be shortening “okay” to “kay”, however this did not fit the context or tone where it was used in the ST. Given that its use is restricted to one passage in the text and is used three times to emphasise a point, it was important the translation should be consistent each time to maintain the repetitive impact (Cavagnoli 38–41).

<b>Italian</b>	<b>Literal translation</b>	<b>My translation</b>
<b>Vabbè</b> le lotte giovanili...	Okay, the struggles of youth...	<b>I get it</b> , the struggles of youth...
<b>Vabbè</b> capire che non siamo...	Okay, understanding that we are not...	<b>I get it</b> , seeing that we’re not...
Dico, <b>vabbè</b> tutto...	I say, it’s all okay...	I mean, <b>I get it</b> all...

The difficulty in translating this word is that even though it is a very short, quick contraction, it contains a third-person singular verb that sets up the rest of the sentence. In English, a similar verb in addition to the “okay” lengthens the quick, dismissive manner Hayat is using to express her exasperation. To compensate, I turned the expression in to a first-person construction, “**I** get it”, so the remainder of the sentence makes sense in English without much modification and maintains the meaning of Hayat accepting these things her sister wants to do.

### Colloquial constructions

Another marker of colloquial Italian is vocabulary and expression choices that denote a less formal register (Berruto, *Sociolinguistica Dell'italiano Contemporaneo* 143–48). They are often idiomatic, and so I tried to use appropriate colloquial equivalents, even if the idiomatic element was lost.

Italian	Literal translation	My translation
Ce l'avevo quasi fatta!	I almost did it!	I almost made it!
Non mi va più, tutto qui.	It doesn't go for me anymore, that's it.	I just don't feel like it any more, that's all.

“Made it” is the more idiomatic expression in this case, as she is referencing completing something on time, rather than completing a particular action. The construction “indirect personal pronoun + *va*” is a colloquial form of expressing that something is good or okay for someone. The verb “to go” is not used the same way idiomatically in English like in Italian, so “feel like it” seemed the best way of expressing how things were not sitting right with Hayat anymore.

### Left Dislocation

*Dislocazione a sinistra* or “left dislocation” is a trait examined in both neo-standard and colloquial Italian (Tosi 54). It is a form of morphosyntactical organisation that introduces the theme at the beginning of the sentence and emphasises the comment or new information on it in the second half, and usually restates the theme as a direct object pronoun instead (Berruto, “Varietà Dialesiche, Diastratiche, Diafasiche” 48).

Italian	Literal translation	My translation
Troppe scelte, è questo il problema.	Too many choices, it is this the problem.	Too many choices, that's the problem.
Gli altri invece li divido per luogo di conoscenza.	The others instead I divide them by place of acquaintance.	Whereas the others I divide by place of acquaintance.
Eppure quelle due parole le capisco benissimo...	But those two words I understand them very well...	Nonetheless those are two words I understand well...
«Certi tratti della storia non li ho capiti».	“Certain features of the story I didn't understand them.”	“I didn't understand some aspects of the story.”

As the literal translations show, the direct object pronoun does not make sense in English, so I either omitted it or rearranged the sentence. I tried to keep the way the sentence was constructed, even if in some cases that meant moving the verb. This way of organisation still often lends itself to colloquial English, allowing me to leave the original emphasis within sentences. However, as the last example shows, at times I reverted to SVO word order to make the sentence less stilted in English.

### Swearing and emphatic expressions

Profanity is used sparingly in the text and is generally not very strong. It is used both to mark the colloquial register, mostly in an emphatic manner for Hayat to express her feelings about the situation. The strongest instances of swearing were *cazzo*, used twice, which I translated as

“shit” both times, but rendering one as “oh shit” to make it a more natural exclamation in English.

There are other emphatic occurrences such as *accidenti* and *mannaggia* which I translated as “dammit” as the closest expression of annoyance that was not too vulgar in meaning (Kinder and Savini 435). The other mild swearing used multiple times is *cavolo*, which literally means cabbage, but is a mild curse often used in place of the stronger *cazzo*, (similar to substituting “crap” for “shit”). As it was used in different positions in the sentence, I had to translate it several different ways.

<b>Italian</b>	<b>Literal translation</b>	<b>My translation</b>
I miei amici sono solo italiani, <b>cavolo!</b>	My friends are only Italians, [cabbage] dammit!	My friends are all Italians, <b>dammit!</b>
«...farebbero un sacco di domande del <b>cavolo</b> .»	“they would do a load of <b>cabbage</b> questions.”	“...[they] would ask a load of <b>crap</b> questions.”
Dove <b>cavolo</b> siamo capitate?	Where the <b>cabbage</b> have we ended up?	Where on <b>earth</b> have we ended up?

The second example is hard to show as a literal translation, because while some dictionaries show mild, non-vulgar words such as “rubbish” and “nonsense” for *cavolo*, it is a stronger term than that, hence my use of “crap” – it is not vulgar, but not neutral either. In the third instance, “hell” would be the most accurate way of rendering Hayat’s bewilderment, however in the very next sentence she makes a reference to the house they have just left as “hell,” and so the repetition seemed odd when it was not there in Italian. References to hell are not typical in Italian swearing, so the alternative I used is more neutral, though still emphatic.

A lot of swearing in Italian draws on religion, particularly Christianity, whereas most swearing in contemporary English is based on sex or the body. The strength of religious swearing in English and Italian also differs, which can make it difficult to translate (Maher 370). An example of this is Mubiayi’s use of *santo* in the text, which as an adjective means “holy,” but can have either a similar connotation to “bloody” and “damn” or “blessed” when used emphatically. This double connotation is lost in English, which Mubiayi has also employed for humorous effect when Hayat uses it in relation to her devout Muslim sister.

<b>Italian</b>	<b>Literal translation</b>	<b>My translation</b>
...e andare tutti i <b>santi</b> giorni a pregare in moschea...	...and to go all the holy days to pray in the mosque...	...and go every <b>blessed</b> day to pray in the mosque...
<b>Santa</b> mia sorella e <b>santo</b> Corano!	My holy sister and holy Qur’an!	<b>Bless</b> my sister and <b>bless</b> the Qur’an!

I tried to retain the exasperated, emphatic nature in the first example, but the clever play on “holy/damn day” is lost in English. The second occurrence was the most difficult to translate, as the phrase is used in an ambiguous place. Hayat seems to be using *santo* in the sense of gratitude to her sister and her religiousness for being able to calm the man aggressively questioning why they are looking for Aziza’s house. Therefore, the more positive “bless” seems appropriate, transformed into a more natural verb formation in English.

## Lei form

Another element of orality I faced challenges with was the “Lei” form of speech, or where characters should have used it but did not. Italian has two main forms of address: the informal *tu* and formal *Lei*, which in English both mean “you”.<sup>2</sup> Any time Italian speakers address someone, they are faced with a conscious decision, because their choice of pronoun also dictates the verb forms they will use (Musumeci 434). English does not distinguish between a formal and informal “you,” but in *Concorso Mubiayi* uses the two Italian forms to convey character’s attitudes and characteristics. I chose to add other markers of formality in English, because leaving them as unmarked would change the way TT readers perceived the characters (Assis Rosa 222).

Italian	Literal translation	My translation
«E io cosa dovrei fare adesso? Secondo <b>lei</b> cosa dovrei fare? Ma tu guarda in che paese mi tocca vivere!»	“And I what should I do now? According to you what should I do? But look in what country have to live!”	“So what should I do now? In your opinion <i>sir</i> , what should I do? Look at what sort of country I have to live in!”
«Ma <b>lei</b> cosa <b>farebbe</b> al posto mio? Eh? No, mi <b>dica</b> ? Eh?»	“But sir what would you do in my place? Eh? No, tell me? Eh?”	“But what would you do in my position <i>sir</i> ? Eh? No, <b>please</b> tell me. Eh?”
«Lui sta bene. Non ti preoccupare. <b>Tu dillo</b> a sua madre che non si deve preoccupare.»	“He’s fine. Don’t worry. You tell it to his mother that she must not worry.”	“He’s okay. Don’t worry. <b>You go</b> tell his mother that she doesn’t need to worry.”

In the first example, I chose to translate *lei* as “sir” in addition to the possessive “your,” to make the level of politeness clear, but italicising the word to show his implied sarcasm. The next sentence uses the idiomatic expression *tu guarda*, which I chose to make a more neutral “look at,” without the pronoun, in English.

In the second example, while the police officer is frustrated with the man, he maintains the *Lei* form, so I added “sir” again to signal formality in English. The second part is a polite command (“*mi dica*”), so “tell me” in English sounds too informal. I added the “please” to signal both politeness and the rhetorical, sarcastic nature of his request, which is punctuated by the emphatic “Eh?” after each question.

The opposite problem occurs in the third instance – Shopa, Ibrahim’s friend, is impolite to Hayat’s sister by using the *tu* form when he barely knows her. It is unclear whether he is intentionally being informal with her, or unknowingly doing so because it is not his native language. Given that later in the story there is no allusion to him speaking Italian badly, I interpreted it as impoliteness, potentially because Hayat and Magda have just been chasing him down. To emphasise how blunt his command is, I translated it as “you go tell,” to make his tone more condescending and dismissive, instead of “you tell,” which could be taken more neutrally.

<sup>2</sup> While a third form, “Voi,” exists, its use is restricted to southern Italy and is less commonly used except in select places nowadays, and is not present in this story.



## Conclusion

While this is by no means a definitive guide to translating these discourse markers and terms from Italian into English, it does show that through analysis of language variety and careful consideration of TL options, a natural variety can be created in the TT without completely losing the feel of the ST. It is also important to recognise when creative choices are needed to convey the orality in the TT, even if on a micro level it seems to move away from the semantic meaning in the ST. Paired with other source-oriented strategies, such as maintaining cultural terms in context, a translator can create an evocative TT without making an author or their characters sound synthetic or from a particular English-speaking region artificially.

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# A Portrait of Literary Translators from Prefaces of Chinese-English Works

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## Abstract

The translator's preface (TP) is the major channel for the translators' voice to be heard in their works. The TP can reveal the translator's personal background, contact, expectations, operational norms, the various considerations in text selection, the translating process and strategies, and the historical background. This study aims to investigate the functions and organisation of 44 sets of TP of translated English literary works from Chinese in the last six decades; and the ways in which the TPs assist the translators in building up their identities and reveal their norms. The TPs are of diverse genres published in six geographical regions. From a discourse analysis perspective, five major moves and 20 sub-moves are identified. With four of the major moves, translators enable target readers to understand their role in the translation process and their translating action. However, apart from acknowledgments, most other translator-related moves are not prominent, indicating a weak identity in their own publications. Quantitative analysis of the linguistic features lends support to this claim. The methodology can be applied with other language combinations, text genres and regions for a greater picture of how TPs can serve for the study of translation history, translation theory, and the translator's identity.

## Introduction

The TP refers to the introduction written by the translator in a translated work. In general, the content comprises introducing the source text (ST) author, its theme, the translation purpose and norms, and the translator's comments or reflections. The aims of the TP are to point out the differences between the culture and language of the ST and the culture and language of the target text (TT); to help TT readers understand the ST culture; to assist readers in knowing the role of the translator, and to highlight the translation considerations (McRae 63). The TP is a collective term, under which separate texts may serve similar functions. The TP and other paratexts have a history of more than one hundred years. Some of them have even become essential texts in the studies of the translator's identity, translation strategies, and how diverse background forces influence translated publications. For example, in the TP of the Chinese version of *Evolution and Ethics* by Thomas H. Huxley (1893), Yan Fu (1898) propounded the translation criteria “*xin, da, ya*”, which means “faithfulness, communicativeness and elegance”. In this article, I aim to investigate the discourse characteristics and themes of the TP. I also examine the translator's identity as well as the translation norm through the TPs. The research perspective is primarily descriptive, and it is supplemented with a quantitative dimension.

## The TP – Sub-genre and Paratext

French literary critic G. Genette was the first person to systematically propose the concepts and analysis of the paratext. According to Genette and later Bhatia, the purpose of a paratext is to make readers more receptive to the main text, and to guide them through the reading. The characteristics of the paratext are dependent on its location, temporal background, form,

communicative means, author and audience, as well as functions. The most studied type of the paratext is the TP, which is discussed in anthologies of reflections on translation to establish translation studies as a discipline (Batchelor 25). In Genette's model, a translation only serves as a paratext to an original text. This presupposes a subservient relationship between translation and original (Tahir-Gürçağlar), a notion argued against in the present study. Instead, Batchelor's definition (142) of the paratext as "a consciously crafted threshold for a text, which has the potential to influence the way(s) in which the text is received" is adopted for this research. Specifically, Deane-Cox (29) calls it "translatorial paratext", which denotes material authored by the translator as opposed to the author, the editor, or other third party.

In Luo Xinzhang's *Essays on Translation*, 25 TPs are selected out of a total of 30 modern essays. The following themes are identified and summarised: translation purpose, translation language, translation methods, readers' acceptability, and literary comparison between the West and China, in addition to the brief introduction of the author of the book and the main content (Jia). This finding resonates with that of Genette and of Bhatia. McRae surveyed 800 contemporary translated English fictions from other languages, and found that only 20% contained a TP. Newmark (170) wrote that "a translated novel without a translator's preface ought to be a thing of the past", asserting that "translators are in a unique position to act as ambassadors between cultures... their prefaces are an excellent locus for disseminating their understanding to readers". Nergaard (203-204) challenged the "marginalised position" of translators in the publishing process, and advocated for more of translators' input, combined with "a politics of visibility of translations and translators". The TP is the major channel for communicating with the reader, a significant resource for studying the translator's identity and the translation strategies, as well as a documentary source for historical research. The TP may become a scholarly work in its own right, a part of the body of metatext or literary criticism in a given field, and an opportunity for the translator to win over the reader to a certain viewpoint (Pallett). The voice which produces the TP is clearly a different voice, with an identity of its own (Hermans).

Having explored this sub-genre as paratext regarding its functions and use for translation studies, I now focus on the author of the paratext: the translator.

### **The Translator's Identity**

Translators are traditionally treated as merely transforming linguistic codes between two languages, and thus like a cultural tool, a wordsmith, and a translation human machine (Zha and Tian). Another conventional view is that translation is inferior to creation, as it is simply imitation based on the source text. The translators are expected to follow closely the ST; any "creative disobedience" is criticised (Zha and Tian 20). Such views indicate that readers look down on the independent identity of translators, treating them as mere affiliates of ST authors, and situating them on a marginal position in the polysystem of literature. Yet, according to the International Federation of Translators, the translator is "the holder of copyright in his/her translation and consequently has the same privileges as the author of the original work" (Translator's Charter, Section II, Article 15).

One of the focuses of translation studies after the 1990s has been the visibility of translators, after Venuti's (*Translator's Invisibility*) complaint of their "invisibility". In addition to textual analysis and cultural research, the translator's identity is now scrutinized within the space of social discourse. As initiators of the translating action, translators must employ their own creativity and repertoire of bilingual and bicultural knowledge and skills, somewhat independent of the ST. Concurrently, they are confined by the language style of the author of the ST, and the aesthetic standard and reading expectation of the TT reader. All of these exert an impact on the translators' purpose, approach, and strategies in the translating

process. Personal factors such as ideology, thinking method, affect, cultural identity and orientation, are also considered in the interpretation of the ST and rendering of the TT (Tu and Zhu). As stated by Freidson and Pym et al., the translators' autonomy implies that they could have authority in mediating interlingual communications.

Identity work of translators is performed through a range of both physical and discursive activities. For discursion, refined discourse analysis is called for to trace rhetorical strategies that individuals use to evoke or distance themselves from certain role-images, and to trace how norms are incorporated in the minds and practices of individual translators (Sela-Sheffy, "Translators' Identity Work"). In the examination of identity talk of around 23 elite translators in Israel, Sela-Sheffy ("Stars' or 'Professionals'") notes that the discourse of the translators was concentrated on and exclusive in adhering to a highly aspiring vocational ethos. But the discourse of 22 non-elite translators was for the most part ambivalent, wavering between embracing and dissociating themselves from this ethos for their professional dignity. Unlike the structural notion of the impersonalised habitus, identity work inevitably involves the person's own perception of oneself, which is not always identical with the social identity imputed to this person by others. It is precisely the ongoing interplay and calibration between the person's perception of oneself and the way one is assumedly perceived by others that creates their sense of self (ibid.). These are the areas that will be covered below.

## **Methodology**

This study aims to investigate the functions and organization of 44 sets of TP of translated English literary works from Chinese in the last six decades, and the ways in which the TPs assist the translators in building up their identities and reveal their norms. In regard to the research tool, the "move analysis" was developed by Swales as a top-down approach (where the focus is on meaning and ideas) for the discourse structure of texts from a genre. The text is described as a sequence of "moves", in which each represents a stretch of text serving a particular function, contributing to the overall communicative purpose of the genre. The moves and sub-moves for the TP as a sub-genre in translated literary works were developed based on McRae's and Law's studies, with minor modifications. When the preliminary moves and sub-moves were applied in analysis, a few of them did not match the communicative functions of the TP sample, and thus modifications were made. For illustration of this "move analysis", move 1 carries a communicative purpose of guiding target readers for reading. All the sub-moves are supportive to this communicative purpose, including sub-move 1a: author's background; sub-move 1b: source text writing background; sub-move 1c: socio-cultural background of TT, etc. The stretch of text can be very long, especially for introducing the socio-cultural background of the TT. Alternatively, a short paragraph can contain several moves or sub-moves, depending on the style of the translator.

In addition, I employ Dimitriu's research framework. Dimitriu identified that TPs serve three functions: (1) an explanatory function that explains the TT to readers; (2) a normative/prescriptive function, which provides instructions or models to be followed by other practitioners; and (3) an informative/descriptive function that gives pertinent translation-oriented information. In my research, I adopt the classification above with the following corresponding labels: interpretive, normative, and informative. I also add two other functions: affective, to express the translator's feelings; and vocative, which calls for the reader's response. In a similar study, Law examined 60 editors' prefaces from 47 English/Chinese and Chinese/English bilingual dictionaries published in the last five decades. A discourse analysis of the themes concluded nine moves for five major functions: interpretive, instructional, informative, affective and vocative. Reference has also been made to Haroon's and Bikmaniené's respective research, both of which shared a similar research design as this study.

Haroon investigated the form and content of nine introductory notes in translations published in Malaysia. Bikmanienė analysed translator's preface as a genre, and probed into the differences and similarities of genre features in 30 Lithuanian and 30 English prefaces in accordance with genre elements, such as format, genre moves and functions. Bikmanienė's analysis was based on the 11 basic genre moves introduced by Xia and Sun. In Law and Ng's study of Chinese Christian translated publications, 17 sets of translators' prefaces from Hong Kong and Taiwan in the recent 40 years were reviewed. Their prefaces serve five major functions like Law's findings above, yet with a few unique sub-moves to reflect their special identity. This study would follow the discourse analysis model of Law and Ng, which is more comprehensive than those of Haroon and Bikmanienė.

For the purpose of my research study, I randomly selected 70 Chinese to English translated literary works published between 1960s and 2010s, and examined the TPs included in these literary works. I selected a variety of literary genres: novel, prose essay, poetry, and theatre. Within these literary works, I identified 44 sets of TP, 63% of the 70 translated works sampled. Given the sample number, it makes no claim to be representative. Compared with McRae's design, which extracted TPs from 800 works, a size of 70 seems minimal. Yet considerations must be made regarding the limited market in Chinese to English literature. According to Venuti (*Scandals*), the percentages of books translated in the UK and the US are extremely low, comprising only between two and four per cent of the total number of books published.

In the samples, the TP may be called "translator's note", "preface" by the translator, "translator's introduction" or "foreword". Sometimes, the acknowledgements, the introduction, and the translator's background are presented separately. They are collectively referred to as TP. My focus is on the TP's function, but not whether it is a continual piece of writing, or how it is named. Translators' footnotes or endnotes are not included, as they mostly supply supplementary information to a specific segment, instead of the whole text. Book covers with translators' background were not found in the samples. Prefaces or introductions of the source text author, editor, etc. are excluded, because they are not "translatorial paratexts" (Deane-Cox). The voices of the former differ from the voice of the latter.

## **Results and Discussion**

In this section, I provide details about the samples collected, and their communicative purposes and functions, with the support of statistical analysis generated by a software application. As control, TPs from 24 Chinese translated books in social sciences are compared for any differences in translation norms.

### **Basic Statistics of the 44 TP Samples**

Among the 44 samples collected from 1960s – 2010s, 33 come from the recent three decades (1990s – 2010s), comprising 73% in total. The main publishers were from the United States (48%), followed by Hong Kong (32%), although most STs are originally written by mainland Chinese and Taiwanese authors. The other four regions of publication were China (9%), UK (7%), Canada (2%), and Taiwan (2%). Half of those in the United States and Hong Kong were university presses: Columbia University, and Oklahoma University in the US, and The University of Hong Kong, and The Chinese University of Hong Kong. The other publishers were commercial, or occasionally independent entities. The operational mode matched these two regions. All the four books from the Chinese mainland came from the 1980s, when the country reopened to the world in 1976 after the Cultural Revolution. In a planned economy as China, the government-financed Panda Books produced all four books.

In terms of genre, novel (68%) was the favourite of publishers, with poetry (24%) the second. Drama and prose essay only comprise 7% altogether. The length of the TPs varies, from half a page (*Twentieth Century Chinese Poetry: An Anthology*. Translated by K. Hsu 1964), to 20 pages (under separate sections, e.g., Introduction, Acknowledgments: *No Trace of the Gardener*. Translated by L.R. Smith & M. Yeh, 1998; *Three Kings*. Translated by B.S. McDougall, 1996).

### Communicative Purposes and Functions

I categorise the 44 sets of TP into five major moves in terms of communicative purpose, which are summarised in the table below.

Move and sub-move	Communicative purpose	Function	Percentage (%)
Move 1	Guidance to target readers for reading		98 <sup>1</sup>
Sub-move 1a	Author's background	informative	70 <sup>2</sup>
Sub-move 1b	Source text writing background	informative	73
Sub-move 1c	Socio-cultural background of TT	informative	59
Sub-move 1d	TT analysis (content, theme)	interpretive	64
Sub-move 1e	Quoting other critics on the ST or the author's style	informative	30
Sub-move 1f	Citing other people's work in relation to the TT	interpretive	52
Sub-move 1g	Book recommendation	informative	5
Move 2	About the translator		75
Sub-move 2a	The translator's background	informative	18
Sub-move 2b	The translator's reflections on the translation process, difficulties, principles, etc.	interpretive / normative / affective	45
Sub-move 2c	The translator's contact with the ST author	informative	50
Sub-move 2d	Comment on other translations of the ST <sup>3</sup>	interpretive	11
Move 3	Translation strategies		68
Sub-move 3a	Allusions / metaphors	interpretive	20
Sub-move 3b	Colloquialisms / period words / jargons	interpretive	11
Sub-move 3c	Linguistic differences between SL and TL / structural change in TT	interpretive	36
Sub-move 3d	Proper names and transliteration	interpretive	48
Sub-move 3e	Pun	interpretive	5
Sub-move 3f	Taboo words	interpretive	2
Sub-move 3g	TT title	interpretive	23
Move 4	Acknowledgments	affective	70
Move 5	The translator's wishes / invitation	vocative	25

**Table 1:** Full list of the moves and sub-moves of the TPs, with their respective functions and average percentage

<sup>1</sup> The average percentage of TPs with an individual major move is calculated by dividing the presence of any sub-move in the major move by the total number of TP samples, i.e., 44. For example, 43 samples contain at least one sub-move of move 1, so the percentage comes to 98% ( $43/44 = 0.9813$ ).

<sup>2</sup> The calculation of the average percentage of TPs containing a sub-move is similar. For instance, 31 TPs have sub-move 1a, so the result is:  $31/44 = 70.45\%$ , rounding up to 70%.

<sup>3</sup> A metatext: a text commenting on another text (Batchelor).

Out of the 20 sub-moves, the average is 7.2; out of the five major moves, the average is 3.4. Almost all TPs (98%) incorporate at least one sub-move of move 1, while the percentage of moves 2 to 4 are about three quarters (75%, 68%, 70% respectively). Only one-fourth of the samples consists of move 5. That means the three major functions in the samples are informative (move 1), interpretive (moves 2, 3), and affective (move 4). The normative function (by sub-move 2b) and the vocative one (by move 5) are under-served by less than 45% and 25% of TPs. The figures indicate that guiding target readers to read the TT is deemed the most important to translators, while all other themes related to translating and the translators themselves less so, especially their direct address to readers (move 5).

### **Linguistic Analysis**

The software application AntConc is a common freeware corpus toolkit in the academic setting. AntConc hosts a comprehensive set of tools, including concordance, word and keyword frequency generators, tools for cluster and lexical bundle analysis, and a word distribution plot (Anthony). The software was used in the present study for keywords and word frequencies based on MacDonald's suggestions. The statistics can shed light on the concerns, themes, and the writing styles in the TPs, indirectly verifying the findings in section 4.2. On the syntactic level, nouns are likely to be key to creating the abstractions in an article. The majority of the 44 sets employ concrete nouns. The keywords used most often are: "Chinese" (67 times), "China" (51 times), "Taiwan" (51), "novel" (49), "first" (46 times), "fiction" (31), "translation" (31), "Beijing" (30), "story" (30), and "author" (29). The frequency of abstract nouns is far much lower than that of concrete ones. Temporal (or related) words are conspicuous: "years" (35 times), "time" (30), "old" (26), "new" (24), "history" (20), "during" (19), "year" (18), and "century" (16). These data, coupled with the frequent move 1 for informative function in the samples, evidence the source and target texts introduction as reading guidance.

The statistics of pronoun use are as follows: "he" (143 times), "his" (136), "we" (25), "her" (21), "him" (18), "our" (13), "me" (12), "us" (12), "you" (6), and "your" (4). The first two male personal pronouns mostly refer to the ST authors, indicative of the emphasis of the TPs, aside from the disproportionate high percentage of male writers. Fourteen TPs address the reader, among which all but two use the third person ("the readers", "western readers", altogether 7 times). A quote from one of the two exceptions is cited below:

Quote (1): "If Cantonese Opera really interests you, I hope the translation serves to give you some idea of what is going on...." (*Waiting Heart*. Translated by K.-H. Cheung, 2016, 183)

According to Hyland, academic prose is not completely impersonal, but writers gain credibility by projecting an identity invested with individual authority, displaying confidence in their evaluations and commitment to their ideas. This is also instrumental to building up a relationship with readers. The most visible manifestation of such an authorial identity is the use of first-person pronouns and their corresponding determiners. The discursive choices align the writers with certain values and beliefs that support identities (ibid.). While the TP cannot be considered an academic article, as it is not persuasive in nature, the two share similar functions: expository and informative. Seen from the linguistic analysis above, less than half of the TP writers use the first-person pronouns (refer section 4.3), and that most use is to express gratitude to work partners. Direct or indirect address to readers is very uncommon, a sign of the weak identity of the translator.



On the meta-discourse level, some findings are made in reference to the language strategies listed by Kopple: text connectives, code glosses, illocution markers, epistemology markers, attitude markers, and bits of commentary. Among these strategies, the commonest in the samples is text connectives for guiding readers through texts, and for helping them construct appropriate representations in memory. The mostly seen textual connectives are “and” (480 times), “after” (33), “when” (32), “however” (18), “while” (15 times), “before” (11), and “although” (6). The first predominant connective aims to link up parallel structure. The other six mainly serve for temporal sequence, or for concession. This characteristic demonstrates that TPs present primarily an informative nature, and secondarily an expository nature. Citations of critics’ opinions on the ST (sub-move 1e, 52%) are commoner than citing other related works to the TT (sub-move 1f, 30%), or recommending books for further reading (sub-move 1g, 5%). This indicates that subject knowledge sharing in these TPs is unusual.

### **Translator’s Voice and Identity**

This article proposes a greater presence and voice of the translator with the TP. The TT is produced with negotiations, which not only occur on the translator’s part, but also among many other parties’, including the editor, the source text author, reviser, and other technical assistants. This is especially true for literary translation. Moves 2 to 5 all represent the voice of the translator, ready material for cognitive study of the translating process. Below are some quotations on the various aspects of the translating act.

(Sub-move 2d) About the translator: Comment on other translations of the ST  
Quote (2): “Père Amiot appears to have enjoyed no small reputation as a Sinologue in his day, and the field of his labours was certainly extensive. But his so-called translation of Sun Tzū, if placed side by side with the original, is seen at once to be little better than an imposture” (*Sun Tzū on the Art of War*. Translated by L. Giles, 1964)

By sharing his evaluation on a former version, the translator explains one of the reasons for the re-translation, and that translating is not merely transforming linguistic codes. Both the translator’s interpretation of the ST and the translator’s writing matter.

(Sub-move 2b) About the translator: the selection of the ST for translating  
Quote (3): “I have selected more undisputable masterpieces of romantic love, some of which could be quite amazing, for translation...” (*Ten Excellent Works of the Chinese Classical Literature*. Translated by C.-W. Hwang, 1996)

The translator Hwang shows his autonomy by mentioning his initiative and the factors in selecting the source texts, which are not reported in all TPs.

(Sub-move 2b) About the translator: translating process and difficulties  
Quote (4): “... I was often on the phone or buttonholing friends, colleagues and shopowners for terms in English.... when I told them that I was working on a literary translation..., they were all more than delighted to help.” (*Taipei People*. Translated by H.-Y. Pai & P. Yasin, 2000, xxxii)

By such citation, TT readers could visualise and realise the translating process involving the translators’ efforts, decisions and struggles.

(Move 3) Translation strategies: allusions, metaphors, proper names

Quote (5): "... I have, with the author's permission... cut down on mixed metaphors which the Chinese delight in, or shortened lists of names or events such as the Three Anti or Five Anti Movements which would require footnotes or need to be paraphrased to make them intelligible to foreign readers." (*A Small Town Called Hibiscus*. Translated by G. Yang, 1983, 11)

Through the TP, readers understand why the English version is as such concerning the above three culture-specific items. These are traces of the translator's negotiation in the TT. This information helps readers realise that the source language does not automatically change to the target one after going through the "black box" of the translator's mind. The author and the ST do not dictate the translator and the TT, and that the translator, as the "creator" of the target text, enjoys the same individuality as the ST author, deserving the same respect.

Dimitriu (204) found that translators' discourse in the prefaces is frequently vague, emotional, impressionistic, and unsystematic. In agreement, this study discovers that there is no order in the presentation of moves in the TPs. The categorisation of moves and sub-moves with the five functions gives evidence to the translators' communicative intention. Yet the target readers of TP are not clearly stated. This discloses the weak identity of translators, as they are not used to speaking directly to their readers.

Translators' background is seldom introduced (in only 18% of TPs), but about half of the TPs relay contact with the ST author, an indication of the translator's role as mediator of the source and target texts, as well as the possibly authoritative status of the ST author. Comparable findings were shared by Bikmanienė. Her Lithuanian translators tended to be more invisible in their prefaces than their English counterparts. The translators centered on the author, and provided little of their own evaluation and explicit explanations of translation issues encountered. The informative function was more prominent in Lithuanian prefaces than in the English ones.

### **Translator's Norms**

Norms operate in each phase of the translation process: in the selection of texts, by determining what source languages and what (literary) models should be selected for the target literature, and in the selection of translation strategies that illustrate the relationships between the two cultures involved (Wolf 8). Chesterman's expectancy norms reflect the expectations that people from a target language community have regarding what translations should be like, the translation tradition existing in a culture, ideological factors, as well as the existence of texts belonging to the same genre.

In relevance to Dimitriu's study, this research learns that "faithfulness" to the ST message is underscored in all the quotations above, no matter in the 1960s or 2000s, a valid and consistent norm for decades. Yet none of the translators recounts the rationale behind that norm, and thus, possible manipulation cannot be traced. Among the 20 sets of TP which reflect on the translation process (Sub-move 2b), 13 discuss the translation principle, the norm. There are two ends in the translation spectrum: taking style precedence over literal translation, or follow the surface meaning and structure as much as possible. The majority of translators favour the former based on what they claim in the TP, while the minority the latter. An example of the former is presented in quote 6 below, while an example of the latter is shown in quote 7:

Quote (6): "I have regarded it of paramount importance to try to retain the easy-flowing style of the original, and to this end it has occasionally been necessary to

sacrifice strict accuracy to the Chinese text.” (*Secrets*. Translated by D. Deterding, 1985, iii)

Quote (7): “My versions are exceptionally literal.” (*The Harmony of the World: Chinese Poems*. Translated by D. Lattimore, 1980, 46)

The translation norm that the translator must choose is whether to transfer both the language form and literal meaning of the ST to the TT, or to convey the underlying meaning of the ST, while adopting TT language for readers’ acceptance. The decision is linked to the translator’s autonomy.

As control regarding translation norm, 24 sets of TP from 104 Chinese translated books in social sciences were randomly selected. The percentage of books containing a TP is only 23%, significantly lowered than the 63% of the literary TPs in this study, but close to that of McRae’s 20%. The subject areas entail economics, management, psychology, sociology, social work, counselling, public policy, etc. They were all published in Taiwan in the 1980s, before the influx of English to Chinese translations from the Chinese mainland in the last thirty years. Among the TPs, only four explicitly state their translation principle. As expected of informative texts, the translators all highlight content faithfulness, and the use of the literal translation approach. The quotes below are rendered from the source Chinese.

Quote (8): “... the literal approach is adopted in translation...” (*Organization Theory: Integrating Structure and Behavior*. Translated by T. Wu, 1983, II)

Quote (9): “... in pursuit of faithfulness, and communicativeness...” (*Handbook of Political Science*, Book Six. Translated by Editing Department of Youth Literary, 1984, 2)

This comparison highlights the distinct translation norm of the literary genre from that of the social sciences. The former employs the liberal approach much more often than the latter, the literal one.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I analyse how the TP assists the translators in building up their identities. While it can never be definitive, a few conclusions can be drawn. Overall, translators are eager to be cultural mediators in introducing authors and their works to the target language society. Some translators are aware of the strategies and norms employed in the translating process, and assume the role of the writer of the target text, as they communicate to their readers. Translators prefer a more liberal translation approach to the source text, for the purpose of rendering the target texts fluent and acceptable to target readership. Yet they focus their attention more on introducing the ST authors and the target text content, and less on the translating process and themselves. When publishers or editors afford translators the opportunity to write a TP, translators do not necessarily regard it as their arena. This is because translators perceive it as a sign of intentional or unintentional self-imposing invisibility of the translator’s identity. A few of them uphold their professional standard as literary translators, but the overall data suggest a weak image. It seems, if we are to advocate that the translator is as important to the TT as the ST author to the ST, it is not just the readers who need to change their perspective, but also the translators.

This study could have enlarged the scope to encompass a greater number of TPs to render the findings more conclusive, if given more resources for more systematic and targeted

searches. A comparison with TPs from the other language direction, i.e., English to Chinese, could boost its significance, and provide a broader picture of the TPs in published literary translations in this language pair. To better understand how translators build up their identities, more attention could be drawn on how they weigh and envision the readers' expectations. Norberg suggested that larger-scaled studies on translation comments in the TPs might concentrate on the historical development of the genre in different cultures, and on the historical development in an international context. Future studies may also address the complex issue of the reliability of the translation principles expressed in TPs, as compared with the actual translation. Another possible topic is to investigate how the translator's identity differs in translated works of different genres through the TPs. As well, other paratexts, including afterword, flip or interviews, can be scrutinised for the translators' views on the main text, the translation norms, and the translating process. Considering Venuti's (*Translator's Invisibility*) advocacy for translator's visibility, an interesting avenue would be the exploration of changes that may be observed from TPs in the future.

While future TPs can refer to this model for the themes, functions and moves for their organisation and content, the methodology can also be applied with other language combinations, text genres and regions, as no obvious cultural influence is observed. In addition, the findings can be compared with those of other genres, language combinations, and regions for a greater picture of the TPs' contribution to the study of translation history and translation theory.

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## Interview with Olivia Hellewell, Literary Translator and Translation Studies scholar

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Olivia Hellewell is a translator from Slovene to English of literary fiction, children's fiction, and non-fiction in the field of arts and culture. In 2019, Olivia's translation of an excerpt from Katja Perat's novel *The Masochist* was awarded first prize in Asymptote Journal's Close Approximations translation contest. She is the translator of Goran Vojnović's *The Fig Tree* (Istros Books, 2020) and Dunja Jogan's *Felix After the Rain* (Tiny Owl, 2020). The latter, a children's book, was selected by the Centre for Literary in Primary Education as one of their best books of 2020. Olivia has also translated poetry and short stories from Slovene into English. In 2020 Olivia established the Less Translated Languages Network. More information about her work can be found at <https://www.oliviahellewell.com/>.

**Cristina Savin (CS):** You gained your Bachelor of Arts in Hispanic Studies and Russian with East European Studies from the University of Nottingham. You then decided to specialise in Slovene language. What made you choose Slovene as your language of focus and become a translator of Slovene literature?

**Olivia Hellewell (OH):** That degree title remains a bit of a mouthful to this day! In my final year of undergraduate study, it became clear that translation was one of my favourite applications of language; I loved our group Russian translation seminars where everyone would come with their own version and we'd pick a text apart. And there was an Advanced Spanish Translation seminar too, where there was more of a literary focus. It was one of my Russian lecturers who told me about a Postgraduate Diploma opportunity, which was a year-long course available to students of a Slavonic language to take up another. They knew I was interested in pursuing translation, and suggested that adding another language to my skill set could be an advantage. I was applying for graduate jobs, but the Diploma appealed too, and it turned out that I was awarded the funding. So I had the choice of learning Serbo-Croat (as it was then referred to) or Slovene, intensively for one year. I knew very little about either language, so I did a bit of searching and discovered that Slovene had a grammatical dual (in addition to singular and plural forms, there's a separate form to use when describing only two people or objects) and I thought that sounded like a challenge I wanted to get my head around. I really think back though, there was more to it than pure grammatical curiosity... at the time, I think I was still wondering whether a career as a translator in the European Commission might have been an option for me. The fact that Slovene was an official EU language, and Croatian wasn't, at that point, probably helped finalise that decision.

**CS:** As a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies at the University of Nottingham, you are currently working on a project titled 'Developing the Supply-Driven Translation Model Beyond a Small Nation Context'. Can you tell us a little bit about this project?

**OH:** The concise answer to this is that it's all about writing up my PhD for publication, and starting to make steps towards taking that research forward. One of the key goals for me during this postdoc was to think about how I can frame my research for a broader Translation Studies



audience, because even though I have written exclusively about Slovene literature in translation, I know anecdotally from other colleagues that what I've observed isn't unique to Slovenia, by any means. Each context has its own specificities, of course, but I'm really interested in opening up that conversation about how literary translations happen when there's no obvious market demand. One of the questions I'm interested in is whether or not efforts to fund and 'supply' literary translations are a preserve of so-called 'small' nations and/or languages much less frequently translated into English, or whether this is actually something that takes place in many literary cultures, regardless of relative size or the perceived cultural capital of a language (and a spoiler: the conference I held as part of my postdoc in 2020, entitled *Supplying Translation*, showed that this really wasn't the case).

**CS:** I'd like to draw on the intersection between your experience as a translation scholar and your passion for literary translation. How do they inform and influence each other?

**OH:** As you can see from my first answer, one of the most important influences is that pursuing an academic career created a space in which I could explore literary translation. Whilst it was interactions with translators outside of an academic institution that were probably the most formative (I'm thinking about making train journeys to London for translation events and talks etc), I don't think I would have had the time - or maybe wouldn't have given myself permission? - to pursue that interest if my employment had been elsewhere. I have always loved how translating from Slovene has granted me a critical angle with which to approach theoretical texts - I'm thinking particularly about those you encounter on a syllabus as a student in the UK, such as those you might find in the Translation Studies Reader, edited by Lawrence Venuti, for example. I often found myself thinking 'hang on, I'm not sure it happens like that with Slovene literary translation', and such thoughts, which came from practical experience, led to ideas that I've then been able to explore in my research.

**CS:** Goran Vojnović's 2016 novel *Figa* has been hailed as 'one of the best Slovenian novels in recent years'. Your translation of *Figa (The Fig Tree)* was published in October 2020 by Istros Books. What attracted you to this book and how was your experience of translating *Figa*?

**OH:** I suppose first and foremost, I've always been interested in Goran's writing, and the space that he occupies in contemporary Slovene cultural life. As I was learning Slovene, he was one of the first authors I was introduced to, and his first novel had not long been published. When I was a postgrad, our Slovene lecturer at the University of Nottingham invited Goran to come and speak to us, and we translated some excerpts of his novels and essays. Then, many years later, having enjoyed Goran's first two novels, I was in Ljubljana one summer and was able to get my hands on a copy of *Figa*. I started to read it, and was hooked; it was a combination of the familiarity of Goran's style, but a different pace. And I think my spoken language was at a particularly strong point, too, so this confidence in my language and a love of the writing just meant that I devoured this novel. I wrote notes in the margins, I started to hear the character's voices in English, and I wanted to tell my friends and family about it: so I made it known to the publisher that should there ever be an opportunity to translate this book, I would love to be the one to do it.

Perhaps this will change, as I'm sure that future projects - if I'm lucky to have them - will also be memorable, but I have a feeling that translating *The Fig Tree* will always be something that stays with me. Lots of things made it an incredibly rewarding translation experience: first and foremost, it's a great novel, and one that I loved personally. It will never not be a joy to spend time immersed in language and characters that you love! And then it was a process that brought so many other experiences, too: I had the opportunity to work collectively on an excerpt with

a group of brilliant Slovene-English translators, when I based my 2019 British Centre for Literary Translation Summer School workshop around this novel; Goran is a pleasure to work with - so professional, so up for discussing queries and questions, and always good fun to work with at promotional events; and then, to top it all, it was a project that kept me company during some particularly challenging periods of my life, both healthwise and otherwise, including being locked down for the first time during the first months of the pandemic in Spring 2020.

**CS:** Would you like to give our readers an idea of your current - and future - translation projects?

**OH:** I fear this answer may be shorter than I would like! I'm currently working on a small side project and am translating some short stories for an anthology. But we're yet to apply for funding, so I can't say too much more. Only that I've been able to choose the author myself, and that was exciting for me (previous projects have often been offered to me, rather than me pitching them to others). At the moment I'm teaching part time at Nottingham University and writing up my PhD research for publication, so unfortunately that doesn't leave much time for translation projects. Lots of dreams, too little time!

**CS:** In October 2020 you launched a call to the Emerging Translators Network (ETN) to canvass for opinion among translators who translate from languages that are typically not quite as prominent in the Anglophone publishing world. Your call was met with interest and enthusiasm among ETN members and led to the creation of the *Less Translated Languages Network* (LTL Network). Can you give our readers a sense of what the LTL Network is about?

**OH:** This was an idea that emerged from my residency at the British Centre for Literary Translation. I found, quite often, that in conversations between fellow translator-in-residence William Gregory, and translator and academic Cecilia Rossi, I would interject with points about how translating from a language such as Slovene doesn't necessarily match up with the typical discourse about literary translation. Such as the advice one might encounter at networking events, for example. A lot of what gets said about pitching to publishers, or negotiating fees, for example, could sometimes feel quite distant from the reality that I had experienced as a translator from Slovene. And so much of what motivated me to put out the call on the ETN was wanting to be reassured that I wasn't alone in thinking these things or encountering these challenges... particularly with practical things such as navigating differences in pay, handling the processes that come with being commissioned by a source culture publisher (translating your contract, so that it can be vetted by the Translator's Association, for example) and so it was really heart-warming to receive so many replies. In that sense, it was all about seeking community, and, I suppose, reassurance.

It still feels very early days, and I think that the network may continue to evolve. So far I have really valued our meetings, and have learnt a lot from more experienced colleagues. I guess in that sense, we've thus far been more of a collective: but I think personally I would like it to be more open - perhaps a platform, and a source of information, that others can dip into freely. We shall see.

**CS:** The members of the LTL Network meet on a regular basis to discuss strategies to promote literature produced and published in less translated languages; and to bring them to an English-speaking readership. One of our strategies is the publication, in the second half of 2022, of a special issue of *The AALITRA Review* to celebrate less translated languages and literatures. We have already received an impressive number of submissions for the special issue, including translations with commentary, research articles and book reviews. The LTL Network is working on a few other strategies to promote authors and translators who work across less

translated languages and literatures. Would you like to give our readers some insight into these strategies?

**OH:** I think the special issue was a great idea, and I was really excited to hear how many submissions were received. We've otherwise been discussing plans for an anthology of short fiction, perhaps with a specific focus on contemporary authors. This is because one of the things that many translators in the group raised was the fact that it's often "canonical" or "classic" authors that tend to be translated from languages that are less typically the source of literary translations into English. If not much is translated from one particular language, there's a view that what is translated must be somehow 'representative' of that literature, or source culture, even. That's obviously incredibly problematic, and also impossible - but to resist that notion, we want to actively spotlight authors that aren't members of the so-called literary establishment.

Beyond this, I think our future plans still hinge on the problems in defining 'less translated languages'. From my standpoint, being a UK-based translator, with English as my first language and Slovene as my second, a 'less translated language' could basically be any language that isn't English, French or German. Maybe Spanish, too. But how could one network possibly cater to all translators of languages other than those four? So there's something more than the 'less translated' issue that the group is touching on, I think. It's to do with structural questions, it's to do with visibility in the Anglophone publishing world, and so much more. It's a huge question and it's something that I'm sure we'll continue to discuss for many more meetings to come. Questions about what the network is, how it can be useful to all kinds of different people working under such specific conditions (albeit all under a similar banner), and how we take it forward are questions that are always in the back of my mind. In a sense, I don't ever expect to solve them: I just hope that we can do good things with it along the way.

**CS:** Thank you Olivia for an insightful interview!

## A Conversation with Nicholas Jose on His Writing and Translation<sup>1</sup>

LINXIN LIANG

Huazhong University of Science and Technology, China

Nicholas Jose is an Australian author best-known for his fiction and cultural essays. He was general editor of the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (2009) and has written widely on contemporary Australian and Asian art and literature. In 2002-05 he was President of Sydney PEN. He was Visiting Chair of Australian Studies at Harvard University, 2009-10, and is an adjunct professor with the Writing and Society Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney. He was Chair of Creative Writing at The University of Adelaide 2005-08, where he is now Professor of English and Creative Writing. He co-translated *The Finish Line* by Sang Ye (1994) and *The Ape Herd* by Mang Ke (included in *Poems for the Millennium*, 1998). He co-edited *Picador New Writing 4* (1997).

**Linxin Liang (LL):** Nicholas. You are very well-known as an Australian scholar-writer-translator. Can you share your educational and career experiences?

**Nicholas Jose (NJ):** I grew up in Adelaide, South Australia, and graduated from the Australian National University in Canberra with a Bachelor of Arts degree with Honours in 1973. I then studied as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University, where I was awarded a Doctorate of Philosophy in 1978. I returned to Australia as a lecturer in English at the Australian National University, from 1978 to 1985. I went to China in 1986 where I taught at Beijing Foreign Studies University and East China Normal University in 1986-87. Late in 1987 I was appointed Cultural Counsellor at the Australian Embassy in Beijing, a position I held until the end of 1990. After that I worked as a writer in Australia and eventually returned to academic life, first as Chair of Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide, 2005-8, and then as a founding member of the Writing and Society Research Centre at Western Sydney University, 2005-2011. During that time, I also taught at Harvard, 2009-11, as Visiting Chair of Australian Studies. I returned to the University of Adelaide in 2012 where I am now an Emeritus Professor. I was also Professor of Creative Writing at Bath Spa University, UK, from 2013-16.

**LL:** As a scholar, you have published extensively in the forms of books, book chapters and journal articles. What's your opinion about how young scholars conduct their studies?

**NJ:** Modes of scholarly writing and research have changed considerably since I published my first articles on English and Australian literature four decades ago. Changes include the use of internet searches and online material which provides shortcuts in seeking answers to detailed scholarly questions. Literary scholarship has also been influenced by new theoretical concerns and ideological positions. In other ways its scope has narrowed, partly because of pressure to publish articles, making ambitious, large scale projects that develop over many years less easy to achieve. I am proud of the Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature, of which I was general editor, but it was a hugely difficult team project. Close to my own areas of interest has been the coming together of literary scholarship with creative writing, giving a more personal tone to literary interpretation and more consciousness of tradition or context for

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creative writing. I hope scholars do not become too specialized or too superficial in what they attempt in future.

**LL:** I agree with you entirely. Well, you have done a very good job. Some scholars argue that our studies should integrate international horizon with the local features. What do you think of this matter?

**NJ:** I agree that this is important and has potential to reveal new understandings. The local is always an immediate context for both the making of literature and how it is received. But the local never exists in isolation, especially for readers who are influenced by writers from all over the world, often in translation. This interaction is most exciting when other languages and literary traditions are involved, and when expansive historical frames are considered.

**LL:** Yes, that's true. At the moment, which courses do you teach? What advice do you give to your students who are interested in writing and Chinese literature?

**NJ:** I teach courses in which creative writing students respond to Chinese literary texts in English translation. I always advise students to look for the point of contact, to find the point where a work of Chinese literature, even when it is read in translation, seems to connect with something in their own experience, including their own reading and writing experience. This will sometimes involve a re-interpreting or re-writing of the Chinese original.

**LL:** Yes, I believe that your student will benefit a lot. How did you develop an interest in studying Chinese language, literature and culture?

**NJ:** I became interested in studying Chinese when I was studying English literature at Oxford in the 1970s. At that time China was relatively isolated from the Western world and I became interested in what Chinese literature and culture might contribute to an enlarged understanding of human creative practice, including contemporary.

**LL:** Yeah, Chinese literature and culture, as a valuable heritage, play an important role. The same is true of other literatures and cultures. I know that you have spent a period of time in China. What's your impression of China?

**NJ:** China is too large and various to sum up in a few impressions.

**LL:** Indeed. At the same time, you are also a prolific writer, who has written widely on contemporary Australian and Asian art and literature. Could you give us some information about it?

**NJ:** I have written fiction set in Australia, contemporary Australia and its past. I have also written about Australian literature and art, including Indigenous storytelling that goes back many thousands of years in different forms. I am interested in the art produced by artists and writers of Asian background in Australia. This has become a more dynamic phenomenon in recent years. There is an important creative energy in Australia that is making something new by drawing on Indigenous and Asian life and experience and thinking.

**LL:** That's great. Does the experience of teaching have a beneficial effect on your writing? What are the effects?

**NJ:** It helps make me aware of the emotions that matter in writing, and sometimes the literary techniques that can make those emotions real and forceful.

**LL:** Yes, the relationship among them is mutual complementary. You have published seven novels, in which there are four about Chinese stories. Why do you choose to write some novels

about Chinese stories? Is there something special or unique in your novels?

**NJ:** The influence of China has been enormous for me—my 5 years' living and working in China, my study of China, my continuing friendships with Chinese people, and my awareness of the contribution of China directly and indirectly to Australian life and culture. The Chinese stories in my books are all stories that connect to Australia in some way. That certainly makes them special and unique.

**LL:** Yes, certainly. *The Red Thread* was written by you in your recontextualizing of *Fu Sheng Liu Ji*. Can you introduce us about your work?

**NJ:** *The Red Thread* is set in China in the year 2000 with Chinese and non-Chinese characters, including a young Australian woman who is an artist. She is introduced to *Fu Sheng Liu Ji* by her Chinese lover and they come to believe they are reincarnations of the loving couple in the original book—which is missing its ending. My novel imagines an ending for them.

**LL:** Well, that sounds very interesting. I am reading this work. Could you please tell us something about what first attracted you to Shen Fu's work, *Fu Sheng Liu Ji*?

**NJ:** I love the hybrid literary quality of the original. It is part-memoir, part-love story, part poetry, part the reflections of a connoisseur of Chinese art and literature. It is a uniquely Chinese form—casual, flexible, intimate. It is mysterious in being unfinished or incomplete. Its scale is significant too—at the other end of the scale from the grand, heroic, tumultuous scope of Chinese history. It is a book by and about an individual.

**LL:** *The Rose Crossing* is another work from you. What inspired you to write this novel? Have you received any feedback from the general readers and the publishing house? And what did the success of this novel bring to you?

**NJ:** I was inspired by the discovery that most modern roses involve a cross between a Chinese rose and a European rose and that this happened, possibly, on an island in the Indian Ocean in the period before Australia was settled by Europeans. That 'rose crossing' at the end of the Ming dynasty seemed to me like a symbolic story from the pre-history of Australia. Readers have found this a provocative revelation, a tall tale. It is the most widely translated of all my novels and has attracted repeated interest from filmmakers.

**LL:** Well, that's great. Who are the writers that you are also interested in? What is it about these writers' works that attract you most?

**NJ:** Among Chinese writers I also like Shen Congwen, for some of the same things that I like about *Fu Sheng Liu Ji*: the intensity of detail and the formal fluidity. I like that in Lao She too. I like many Australian writers, especially the poet and novelist Randolph Stow. I like Joseph Conrad. I like Willa Cather. I like the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier.

**LL:** They are very famous. And what have these benefited you for your writing?

**NJ:** These writers all work across cultural boundaries. They are 'transcultural' writers in that way. Their work is rich in intensity of evocative detail, often bittersweet, with a kind of ambiguity about human possibilities and limitations.

**LL:** Yes, that's true. As a translator, could you talk something about your translated or co-translated works?

**NJ:** I have translated only occasionally, to make work available in English by writers I admire.

**LL:** I know you co-translated *The Finish Line* by Sang Ye (1994) and *The Ape Herd* by Mang Ke (included in *Poems for the Millennium*, 1998). Could you tell me a little bit about what first attracted you to Sang Ye's and Mang Ke's works?

**NJ:** Mang Ke is a wonderfully grand, passionate and eloquent poet—hard to translate. Sang Ye has one of the sharpest eyes of any observer I know, backed up by knowledge, curiosity and compassion. I wanted his impressions of Australia to be available.

**LL:** During the process of co-translation, how did you work with other translator(s)?

**NJ:** It's a long time ago. For Mang Ke's work I collaborated closely with a native Chinese speaker who is also a good writer. For Sang Ye's work I collaborated with my colleague Sue Trevaskes who knows Sang Ye's writing better than anyone. In each case we developed our way of working in response to the particular project. We sat side by side as we worked.

**LL:** I believe that those were some memorable experiences. And what is the most difficult problem for you in translating Chinese writer's work?

**NJ:** Chinese is rich in idioms that cannot be translated literally. It also has its own formulas and patterns. Very often the translation will look like a total rewriting—but that is sometimes the best way to do in English what the Chinese is doing in Chinese.

**LL:** Well, yes. Throughout the translation process, how do you think of the guidelines for translation?

**NJ:** There need to be guidelines at the start. These can be developed by trying some different things in draft form. Once settled, the guidelines are needed to give shape or coherence to the translation. This is especially true of poetry.

**LL:** Indeed, for poetry translation, it's important to follow some guidelines. What skills or qualities do you think are needed for a translator?

**NJ:** Linguistic versatility—the capacity to adopt different language masks or voices according to need. Collaboration is a very good way to do it, as it brings two to the process, rather than just one.

**LL:** Yes, you are right. What do you think of the relationship or difference between writing and translating?

**NJ:** At one level there is great similarity: a writer is attempting to transcribe thoughts, feelings, images, sensations. So is a translator. A translator is more constrained, but has a strong guide in the original.

**LL:** I agree. The literature from China or other non-English-speaking countries is probably one of the least translated literatures into English. How do you feel about it? Do you have any suggestions for dealing with the current situations?

**NJ:** It is a great failing and a great loss that Anglophone literary culture is not very active in translation and is nowhere near as engaged with Chinese literature as I would hope. The situation is changing slowly. I can only ask Chinese writers, translators and literary scholars to be patient and to help as much as possible.

**LL:** Thank you for your suggestions. At last, would you please introduce your current work or future plan about writing and translating?

**NJ:** I have a few different projects. I hope to complete a new novel that is about a woman seeking justice for the death of her husband. I hope to write some essays, partly biographical, about Australian poetry in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when modernism and other traditions were in tension. I would like to improve my Chinese and do some more translation!

**LL:** Well, I'm looking forward to whatever you do in the future. Thank you so much.

**NJ:** I'm glad we can have a conversation, thanks a lot.



**Review of Marie Darrieussecq's *Crossed Lines* (trans. Penny Hueston)**

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Darrieussecq, Marie. *La Mer à l'envers*. Paris: P.O.L., 2019.

———. *Crossed Lines*. Translated by Penny Hueston. The Text Publishing Company, 2020.

For Marie Darrieussecq, the most pressing issues confronting the world are mass migration, climate change and electronic surveillance: in her novel *Crossed Lines* she explores the first of these by bringing together two characters from disparate spheres – a middle-class Parisian psychologist, Rose Goyenette, and Younès Aboussa, a Nigerien who is attempting to cross the Mediterranean to Europe in search of a better life. They encounter one another when the cruise ship on which Rose is holidaying rescues a group of migrants from a sinking boat. Darrieussecq explores how the lives of the two characters become entangled from this point on and details the hesitancy Rose displays back in France before committing to offer Younès help. In the final third of the novel, the focus expands from a study of Rose's thoughts and experiences towards a form of social documentation, as Darrieussecq draws on her own travels and research in describing Rose's visit to a migrant camp near Calais and Younès's tragicomic journey from Niamey to a beach in Tripoli.

*Crossed Lines* is the seventh of Darrieussecq's books to have been brought out by Text Publishing in Melbourne and the writer seems to have found her English-language home there, English translations of her earlier works having been published in New York and London. It is the sixth book of hers to have been translated by Penny Hueston, whose flair for capturing the subtleties of Darrieussecq's expression was recognised in 2020 by the Australian Academy of the Humanities – which awarded her its Medal for Translation for her version of Darrieussecq's *Being Here: The Life of Paula Modersohn-Becker* (Text Publishing, 2017).

Hueston's deft touch is evident from as early as the front cover of *Crossed Lines*. The original French title, *La Mer à l'envers*, resists literal translation; the phrase "à l'envers" can have various meanings, from "upside down" and "inside out" to more figurative meanings connoting confusion or absurdity, as in the expression "C'est le monde à l'envers." Drawing on a phrase from analogue telephony, Hueston's choice of "crossed lines" captures not just the element of confusion in the relations between Rose and Younès, but also the traversing of personal and political boundaries. The text of the novel itself is written largely in the "free indirect style", a technique developed by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers which fuses narrative description with the delineation of a character's thought processes, giving the reader a more direct sense of access to a character's mind by avoiding repetition of "she thought", "she wondered" or "she said to herself". As a result, much of Darrieussecq's original has an easy conversational tone about it, which Hueston reproduces accurately and fluently. In places Darrieussecq also incorporates speech into her indirect style, which Hueston sometimes converts back into direct speech, no doubt in an effort to make things clearer for the reader. Areas which often present difficulties for translators – slang and humour – are well handled by Hueston. Rose's son Gabriel speaks in teenager-ese and Hueston turns "dégueu" into "gross" and nicely exploits the comic possibilities of the colloquial "like". There is an especially tricky joke in which Rose's daughter Emma, when released from behind a locked door, emerges

singing the chorus of Elsa's popular song from the Disney animation *Frozen* (2013); in French this is "Libérée, délivrée" ("set free, released"), rather than "Let it go", and Hueston adeptly manipulates the narrator's description to preserve the humour of the original.

In a number of places Hueston chooses distinctively Australian terms to translate Darrieussecq's French. An "édredon" becomes a "doona" (rather than the British or American "duvet", "quilt" or "comforter") and "bornes", a slang term for kilometres, is rendered as "kays", the Australian term providing a handy metric equivalent unavailable in British or American English (although their militaries have taken up the term "clicks"). She draws on the colloquial Australian expression "to be the full bottle on" ("to be fully informed") in a couple of places: to translate "potasser" (for which a bilingual dictionary might offer "to bone up" or "to swot up") and for "se mettre à" ("to apply oneself to" or "to learn about"):

elle a potassé les droits des mineurs isolés (*La Mer à l'envers*, 203)  
she is the full bottle on the rights of unaccompanied minors (*Crossed Lines*, 230)

n'allez pas croire que Rose ne s'est pas mise à l'anatomie (*La Mer à l'envers*, 219)  
[d]on't think for a moment that Rose isn't the full bottle on anatomy (*Crossed Lines*, 247)

Hueston's inventive choices are a reminder of the role that regional terms can play in literary translation. Forms of British English have of course traditionally dominated the translation of French literature into English, whether in formal or in informal registers (Cockney slang often standing in, for example, for nineteenth-century Parisian *langue verte*). But Hueston is happy to go her own way: why shouldn't translators of European literature, based in Australia, she implies, use the terminology they are most familiar with? And other Australian translators of contemporary French literature are taking a similar path. In Joseph Ponthus's long poem *À la ligne* (2019), the morning break which the narrator takes at the fish-packing factory is, in Stephanie Smee's translation, his 'smoke-o' (*On the Line*, Carlton, Vic., Black Inc., 2021, ebook edition). Now that Australian publishing houses are introducing some of the world's leading writers to English-language audiences, it seems that their works may start to take on a faint whiff of eucalyptus...

If Darrieussecq conceived *Crossed Lines* as an 'issue' novel, what perspective does she offer on the question of migration? The reader is presented with Rose's perceptions of her interactions with Younès and his fellow migrants, but not in entirely conventional realist terms. Darrieussecq generally refrains from naming the emotional states of her characters: she wishes to avoid the 'commonplaces of psychology', as she has put it,<sup>1</sup> preferring instead to describe the detailed experience of sensation. Rose's delayed reaction to her first encounter with the migrants on the cruise ship, in which she had to step over the body of a drowned man, is framed not in terms of shock, sorrow or horror, but contains a sort of ineffability:

The cabin seemed full to overflowing with a strange fluid. She could still feel the movement in her legs, in her hips, from when she'd stepped over the body [...] Even the idea that she could have walked on top of him... The contact, the idea of the contact. (54)

Rose's internal monologues, in which she ponders how she should behave towards Younès or how Europe should deal with migration, are generally presented without narratorial

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by Simon Kemp, "Darrieussecq's mind", *French Studies* 62/4 (2008), p. 431.

identification of her emotional state. Her experiences are described in somewhat obscure mechanistic terms, as when she listens to a debate about immigration: “Rose felt valves opening and shutting inside her” (45) – leaving the reader uncertain perhaps about exactly what is being felt. Rose’s reflections on migration seem relatively sedate: she entertains the idea of having all the migrants aboard the ship come and live in tents in her French home town, before rejecting this: it was “perfectly logical to share the planet in a better way, but in Clèves?” (46) When Younès arrives at the Gare de Lyon, she watches him but refrains from making contact, thinking that her earlier gift to him of a phone was “already a lot” (125). Later, staring down from a smart terrace bar at migrants gathered by the Seine, she thinks: “Getting caught up in all this. It’s not like her” (133). It is only later, when Younès phones and tells her that he is lying injured in a migrant camp near Calais, that Rose finally commits to helping him: her decision is immediate and no explanation is offered, apart from that she was “speaking with a boy the same age as her son, emigrated from Niger, wounded in a makeshift camp” (171). Migration is treated in deliberately unemotive terms and Rose retains a certain opacity; for all this, it is of course obvious where the novelist’s sympathies lie. Some of the most striking passages in the novel appear in the description of Rose’s visit to the otherworldly migrant camp near Calais and in Younès’s tales of his travels from Niamey – that is, in the sections which do not feature Rose outlined against a comfortable middle-class backdrop. The novel returns to just such a setting in its final images: Rose lies ‘safe’ in bed beside her husband; outside, the Harmattan wind has been blowing and the Pyrenees stand “covered with a red veil of Sahara sand” (280). Africa is crossing the sea to Europe, but this is inevitable and need not be a cause for alarm, the narrator seems to imply: the mood is not menacing but peaceful.

**Review of Jayant Kaikini's *No Presents Please* (trans. Tejaswini Niranjana)**

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Kaikini, Jayant. *No Presents Please: Mumbai Stories*. Translated from Kannada by Tejaswini Niranjana. Scribe, 2020.

The Australian imprint of a collection of Jayant Kaikini's Kannada-language short stories in English by subcontinental translation theorist, Tejaswini Niranjana, is an event in the Alain Badiou sense. In 2018, *No Presents Please* (Harper Perennial 2017) won the prestigious DSC Prize for South Asian Literature at the Tata Steel Kolkata Literary Meet and the Atta Galatta-Bangalore Literature Festival Lifetime Achievement Award. Recently, it received the 2021 National Translation Award in the United States of America, where an ethos of homogeneity, notwithstanding prolific multilinguality, has trouble grappling with the profligate profusion in even thinking about the languages that exist in India, making such a recognition even more remarkable. In Badiou's formulation, any truth is constituted by rupturing the order which supports it, so when Scribe, the multi-time winner of Small Publisher of the Year award in Australia, picks up Kaikini's stories in Niranjana's translations, it is an acknowledgement of the truths of multilingualism that interrupt Anglophone publishing regimes and demonstrate both its global dominance and its localised defences. Independent English-language publishers making the all-important decision to foster and nurture heterogeneous story-telling is a necessary move to transform the predominantly Anglospheric preferences of the Antipodean literary scene. However, in this venture, many of the critical non-European genealogies that bring such translations into being are submerged in the oceans that separate climate, content and communication. This review is a brief attempt to shine a light on such translatory forays and the routes they traverse; moreover, it privileges the ecosystems of plurality that constitute the rainforests of Indian writing in translation, rather than individual texts or translators.

After quarter of a century of postcolonial independence, the terrain of Indian literature began to be divided between those who read and wrote in the vernacular tongues routinely, and those who were beginning to do so preponderantly [in English](#). Derived from the Latin *verna* (slave born in the household rather than abroad), the word 'vernacular' in the context of Indian publishing certainly attests to the place that literatures in the twenty-plus officially recognised languages of India had been relegated to, in its print market share. This does not mean that the so-called vernacular story-telling traditions had disappeared in the face of a dominant English-language industry: to the contrary, prolific *bhasha* (language) literatures enjoyed enormous readership, in the north, south, east and west Indian languages. But the imperial dictum in the 1835 [Minute on Education](#) by British politician, Thomas Babington Macaulay, that a "single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" had left behind the detritus of a certain colonial cringe.<sup>1</sup> Under British Rule, the Minute provided justification for an English language pedagogy policy for the subcontinent that would produce brown sahibs necessary to administer the Jewel in the Crown of the Empire. After independence, Anglophony became an aspirational ambition, and the price of passage into the putative metropolitan centre, for postcolonial elites who had inherited the fruits of freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> Kumar, Anu. "Thomas Macaulay won the debate on how to shape Indian education. So who were the losers?" *Scroll.in*. Feb 04, 2017, 11:30 am IST. Accessed Dec 30, 2021. <https://scroll.in/magazine/821605/thomas-macaulay-and-the-debate-over-english-education-in-india>

Thus was born a divide between English-proficient and non-English proficient citizens of the brand new nation state. Those chasing the upwardly mobile dream in independent India were educated in English-medium schools, if they could afford it, while the vernacular medium came to occupy contested place in the hierarchised space of such a global *lingua franca*. Despite state-sponsored support for vernacular literatures via prizes and publication outlets, and a faithful following by those who had been schooled in formative anti-colonial convictions, Indian Writing in English (IWE) made inroads into the imaginations of later generations like mine. Buttressed by the efforts of Penguin Books India that had become a singular force for promoting subcontinental literatures in English in the 1980s, especially after Salman Rushdie won the Booker Prize in 1981, we were 'into' IWE.

In the Masters of English Literature that I undertook at Delhi University, the English literary canon reigned supreme: from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf. It was not until I enrolled in an MPhil that the first trickles of postcolonialism and translation studies entered the dry channels of my consciousness. My introduction to Jayant Kaikini's work happened soon after, when I interned as an editorial assistant at *Katha* in New Delhi in the mid-1990s. In the lead-up to fifty years of independence in 1997, India was experiencing an efflorescence of sorts in all things Indian, part nativist, and part an interrogation of nationalism which entailed delving into the roots of such sensibilities. *Katha* burst into this space with the audacious assumption that we English-educated postcolonial elites, in the age of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, bopping in equal parts to Bob Marley and the Beatles, changing from jeans into sarees for a SPIC-MACAY concert on classical Indian dance and music, were interested in reading *bhasha* literatures. Started as a grand experiment by the powerhouse Geeta Dharmarajan, this not-for-profit translation publishing house was an attempt to re-ignite interest in the subcontinent's multilingual narrative traditions among new generations not familiar with contemporary vernacular stories. The word *katha* means "story" in many South Asian languages and also "words" (loosely translated) in my mother tongue, Bangla. Creating an enormous network of newspaper and magazine editors, literary groups and local librarians, and calling upon their expertise to nominate the best story in that *bhasha* for the year, Dharmarajan inaugurated, in 1990, what would become an eagerly awaited annual event of the *Katha Prize Stories* series. Connecting writers with readers interested in vernacular stories who happened to be bilingual but did not necessarily have any prior experience of translating, she started training a motley crew, including me, who were fluent in English but also miraculously possessed any vestigial reading proficiency in our own *bhasha* literatures. While multilingual translators did their job of translating that year's 'best' story to go into that year's volume, we, the fledgling editorial team, collectively set our minds to work out those pesky quintessential questions: to italicise or not, to provide a glossary or not, parallel translations etc., to a readership that was Indian and, yet, not *au courant* with contemporary *bhasha* literatures in other regional languages. Our approach was diametrically different to Macmillan India's *Modern Indian Novel in Translation* series, launched in the heady excitement of that decade, which had chosen to italicise Indian words that would be available to most Indians, and of providing glossaries for those readers who might need help. Thus was born the *Katha* 'school' of translation that spawned a legion of translators like me, and a network known as Friends of *Katha*, who set about to co-create the *kathas* being spun out by myriad *bhasha* writers.

To return now to the task at hand after that elaborate backdrop above to the mise-en-scène of modern Indian translation practices (a colleague of mine often complains about the interminable weight of "too much history" that any subject from the subcontinent carries). Circa 1995: the best fiction published in 12 Indian languages in 1994 was to appear in *Katha Prize Stories* Volume 5. The collection included Kaikini's story "Amrutaballi Kashaya" from the magazine, *Sudha*, Yugadi special issue, endorsed by two doyens of the Kannada language

literary scene. Translated as “Unclaimed” by my colleague, Keerti Ramchandra,<sup>2</sup> who is fluent in 5 Indian languages, this story is titled “Unframed” by Niranjana in her curated collection, *No Presents Please*. Another story in this prize-winning edition appeared in a youth imprint of Katha’s, *Yuvakatha Book One*, translated by Padma Ramachandra Sharma in 2000: “Dagadu Parab’s Ashwamedha”<sup>3</sup> which appears as “Dagadu Parab’s Wedding Horse” in Niranjana’s 2018 treatment. I want to parse the distinctions between these translations by way of providing an insight into the multiple ‘truths’ that are produced in these interpretations and interventions: truths not of veracity or verisimilitude, but truths of the sites and the situations that produced them. As Niranjana explains in the “Translator’s Note” at the end of *No Presents Please*, in choosing to re-translate three previously-translated stories, she was, on the one hand, matching “the language and style of the rest of the stories” in this collection, so as to provide a site-specific coherence within the boundedness of its covers; and on the other, signalling the various geo-specific situations in which the translations took place during her “regular Bombay visits” to a city that she saw “with the same affection and curiosity that Jayant displays” (Kaikini 263). In that very sentence lies an instance of the multiplicity of truths: Bombay as the city for which both writer and translator, both outsiders to it, share a particular affinity, and the Mumbai in the subtitle of *No Presents Please* that gestures towards the [politics of renaming](#) of a new resurgent India. It may be apropos to ask if it important at all for a lay (in the sense of non-specialist/non-insider) reader to grasp the subtleties of these nomenclatures, and if not, what is the purchase of writers and translators as careful as Kaikini and Niranjana to indicate them? Niranjana provides a clue:

Undertaking this translation was for me a coming to terms with the ruse of the ordinary that Jayant Kaikini has mastered. While “ruse” is often understood as subterfuge or deception, I read it as a gentle narrative trick, so evident in every single story of this collection.... the ordinary often reveals itself as surreal—.... The challenge for me, then, was to maintain the ordinariness of the narrative until it could be maintained no longer, and to let the translation lead the reader along without drawing attention to itself. At the same time, when the surreal began to seep into the story, and the ruse of the ordinary opened out onto a different terrain of engagement for the characters, the translation had to find the right words to signal this “turn”. (“Translator’s Note”, Kaikini 261-262)

The ruse of the ordinary inflects every corner of the island-archipelago today known as Mumbai. Continuously inhabited since the South Asian Stone Age, Bombaim passes into English hands through the marriage treaty between the Portuguese Catherine of Braganza and Charles II of England in 1661. A seat of the British Presidency and one of the largest seaports in the Arabian Sea after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, Bombay becomes the Indian Ocean conduit that connects all of Empire’s outposts, including Australia. Postcolonial India makes it the financial capital and famed site of Bollywood, temples of desire as Vijay Mishra calls it, and ‘Bambai’ for the ordinary persons from anywhere/nowhere in India to make their way to, to make their fortune.<sup>4</sup> That is the locus of Saadat Hasan Manto’s *Bombay Stories* too, translated from the Urdu by Matt Reek and Aftab Ahmad and compiled together by Vintage

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<sup>2</sup> Kaikini, Jayant. “Unclaimed”. Translated from the Kannada by Keerti Ramachandra. In Geeta Dharmarajan & Meenakshi Sharma eds. *Katha Prize Stories* Volume 5. New Delhi: Katha, 1995. pp 173-184.

<sup>3</sup> Kaikini, Jayant. “Dagadu Parab’s Ashwamedha.” Translated from the Kannada by Padma Ramachandra Sharma. In Geeta Dharmarajan & Keerti Ramachandra eds. *Lukose’s Church and Other Stories* (The Yuvakatha Series Book One). New Delhi: Katha, 2000. pp 65-75.

<sup>4</sup> Mishra, Vijay. *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*. London & New York: Routledge, 2001.

Books in 2012. As the blurb of that collection states, “Arriving in 1930s Bombay, Saadat Hasan Manto discovered a city like no other: a metropolis for all, and an exhilarating hub of license and liberty, bursting with both creative and helpless despondency” (Manto n.p.). Finally, it is the twenty-first century megalopolis at the site of another wave of global capital that we arrive at: it is this Mumbai that Kaikini’s stories are set in and curated through Niranjana’s translations. It is a Mumbai that writer Suketu Mehta calls *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*, where dreams travel with nightmares on a regular basis, where informal settlements flank the highest skyscrapers.<sup>5</sup> *No Presents Please* invokes the sea of fervid, fevered, fecund humanity that heaves in Mumbai, and introduces us to “photo framers, flower markets, and Irani cafes, revealing a city trading in fantasies while its strivers, eating once a day and sleeping ten to a room, hold secret ambitions close” (Kaikini blurb).

Allow me to take up the first story I mention above, translated as “Unclaimed” and “Unframed” by Ramachandra and Niranjana respectively, in order to think through these manoeuvres. Kaikini’s Kannada title emphasises the medicinal decoction (kashaya) that the central character’s mother conjures up from herbs like amrutaballi and punarnava, thereby metaphorising the nectar (amrit) of care that gives renewed life (purnarnava). However, both Ramachandra and Niranjana choose to erase the regular themes of rebirth, regeneration and revivification implied in this ordinary human sentiment. They pivot instead on the prefix ‘un’ to indicate the negative of belonging (Un claimed) and structuring (Un framed). Gangadhar, the son, and owner of a frame shop, has to deal with orders whose owners never arrive to collect them: in these destitute portraits are mirrored the million lives of a megacity that is both enterprising and devouring. As one customer says, “he was an orphan who had grown up in the city’s armpits without a mother or a father. He had caught the pulse of the city and shaped his life according to the clocktower’s hands” (Kaikini 44). But in the move from Ramachandra’s title “Unclaimed” to Niranjana’s “Unframed”, readers might perhaps detect something of the schemata of an unscaffolded city where meaning has to be unanchored from sentimentality; or as Gangadhar’s mother argues, “Why put a frame around memories” (Kaikini 40)? This is where Niranjana’s nuanced translation of Kaikini’s narratives of the ruse of the ordinary becomes poignant and pointed.

In this same city, as coexisting citizens of a claustrophobic population overflow, the other story I mentioned provides us with an even more interesting example of signalling the “turn” that refers to Niranjana’s efforts to capture the ruse. Sharma’s 2000 translation uses the original word from the Kannada title, Ashwamedha, a Vedic practice to assert imperial sovereignty that involved a royal horse being left to wander unharnessed throughout lands that the ruler could then claim. This is the dream that any migrant arrives into Mumbai with: to become a Mumbaikar and reign in it. Niranjana’s title uses much the more prosaic words “Wedding Horse” that grooms strut on their way to the bride’s home: those in the know can identify this as part and parcel of marriage processions in many communities, while those not familiar with this routine ritual can still intuit that the horse is the vehicle of choice to make possible the union desired in the said wayward wedding. While Ashwamedha cues up insider readers to the larger-than-life nature of the struggles of Mumbaikars, of the journeys that down-and-out denizens of Bombay make on a daily level; to those who might be peeping into it as outsiders, the use of the ordinary words, “wedding horse,” bring home the contrast of Dadagu Parab’s life, humble and heroic at the same time to just be able to survive the city. These ‘turns’ illuminate the multiple ‘truths’ of every translation in *No Presents Please* and inhabit the in-between space of history and no-history in an urban landscape that reinvents India every day. The lack of any ‘ancient’ etymology or everyday mythology evidencing linguistic history in

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<sup>5</sup> Mehta, Suketu. *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2004.

the word “wedding horse” is a testimony to the intellectual challenge entailed in translating the continuities and discontinuities of such postcolonial places.

In the ferment of the 1990s, a number of studies in postcolonialism emerged, among them was Niranjana’s ground-breaking theoretical monograph in 1992: *Siting Translation: history, post-structuralism and the colonial context*, that posited translation itself as a site that “shapes, and takes shape within, the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism” (773). One of the aftermaths of this asymmetry is the continued need to go behind the translation of words that are not readily available and accessible to the global *lingua franca* of the English language. In such a context, new translations like Niranjana’s point to the necessity of expanding our vocabularies such that we would understand the references to Ashwamedha just as readily as we do to Odysseus’s epic voyages, and at the same time connect with the ‘turn’ of words like “wedding horse” into an aggregation of meanings. The stories range a span from 1986 to 2006, the twenty-year period during which India turns from a socialist republic to an open economy, paving the way for neoliberalism and urban reorganisations of various kinds. This transitory time is signalled through items of daily use that employ a specific turn of phrase, advertisements, snippets of Bollywood movie songs, changes in locales and local landmarks. Not chronologically arranged, these stories introduce us to characters who seem to be proximate enough but not related through blood ties or localities that seem to exist in several generations: everyone seems to be an *arrivant* into Mumbai and has the potential to both forge relationships with other migrants, or melt at any time into its netherworlds. By making the decision to formalise a sustained diction for them throughout, Niranjana also imparts in her translation “the flavour of the speech, the hybrid Hindi-Urdu-Dakhani speech that is the cultural vernacular of Bombay and is signalled prominently in all the stories” (Kaikini 265). This claim in her “Translator’s Note” made me desperately want to read the original and note that auditory *différance* the Konkani-speaking Kaikini would have made in Kannada in which he writes (of which I know not a word), and one which Niranjana herself draws attention to, “thinking about which might tell us more about the relative lack of Kannada critical writing on his work” (Kaikini 266).

Hence, though Jayant writes in Kannada, people may wonder if he is a “Kannada writer.” The language of Jayant Kaikini’s fiction—as well as the characters who populate the stories—exceed the post-Independence dynamic that ties language to identity. In doing this, they speak to the experience of the city that smoulders in these pages. (“Translator’s Note” 267)

One of the interesting compository strategies that this compilation uses is *not* to indicate section breaks (in the Katha style, this was done by highlighting opening words in bold). Niranjana’s (or the publisher’s) choice to not differentiate temporal or spatial shifts of locations renders the experience of reading these stories more aligned to the inexorable movement of the global city, while also tendering the local orality of the narration audible. Each of the stories in this collection pulls us along with the narrative, only to stop us in our tracks at that turn, that demands of us to excavate its genealogy via myriad hyperbolic megalopolises that seemingly could float anywhere from Mexico City to Manila to Mumbai, but which intimate their utter specificity through such translatory ruses.



**Review of Sònia Hernández's *Prosopagnosia* (trans. Samuel Rutter)**

JORGE SALAVERT

Hernández, Sònia. *Prosopagnosia*, translated from Spanish by Samuel Rutter. Scribe, 2020.

Hernández (Terrassa, 1976) is a relative newcomer to the Spanish literary scene. Her first published work was a book of poems in 2006. Since then, she has published four novels, *Prosopagnosia* being the only one translated into English.

The first remarkable thing about the book is the fact that Scribe has chosen to put on the cover the title of the first part of the book, while the title of the Spanish original (*El hombre que se creía Vicente Rojo*) becomes merely the second part in the English translation. *Prosopagnosia* is of course a much more eye-catching title than 'The man who thought he was Vicente Rojo'.

Prosopagnosia is a neurological disorder whose sufferers are unable to recognise familiar faces. Berta is the (extremely) unreliable narrator's daughter, she has fainted at school while staring at a painting by a famous exiled painter, Vicente Rojo. The painter helps the young student get home and makes the mother's acquaintance.

But Berta was actually playing a game she calls prosopagnosia. One has to hold their breath until the brain makes the player see distorted images. When played in front of a mirror it is, allegedly, more fun. If we are to believe Berta, of course.

Both mother and daughter are having existential crises. Berta is a teenager, and her father has abandoned the family home. From her teenage perspective, ugliness is everywhere to be seen. Her mother has her own issues – she's extremely insecure about her professional ability as a journalist, her own body image, and the personal and professional pathways she can take after a divorce. Thus, meeting the painter seems to cast her some sort of a lifeline: surely an interview with the renowned artist would regain her some good standing and self-esteem.

But is the painter the person he claims to be? Is the narrator the kind of person she has always thought she was? The novel explores the uncertain boundaries between truth and fiction, but it does so in a rather patchy way. Berta's mother is set as the sole narrative voice. Initially, we are led to think that *Prosopagnosia* is going to be a confession of sorts:

For a large part of my life I have been plagued by the proximity and inevitability of the end. [...] I have always felt that the end was very close to me. It's like an endless *memento mori*. Exhausting.

My relationship with Pablo [ex-husband] began when I was exactly eighteen years old. Now I'm forty-three. [...] we had been living a continuous ending, as if our relationship had never even had a beginning.

I'm forty-three years old. Pablo left home on the day of my birthday. [...] Being forty-three years old places me near the end of something. (13)

Thus, the story focuses on her existential angst while Berta's serious teenage issues seem to be somewhat neglected. The article or essay she will write on the famous painter will help her achieve personal growth by overcoming her self-doubting personality, her fear of

failing and disappointing others. Whether this new foray into journalism achieves that objective or not is beside the point, really.

The second part of the *nouvelle* hardly advances the plot anywhere. Berta suggests the painter could be asked to help the school community to paint a massive mural in honour of one of her fellow prosopagnosia practitioners, Mario. He has been diagnosed with a serious disease. The painter hesitates. Berta's mother continues to visit him. The interviews she holds with him feel more like therapy sessions than journalistic work.

Eventually there is a confession of sorts from the fake painter. The story points towards a positive moral, namely that it should be possible to break away from our past and construct a new personality that gives more meaning to our self.

Yet as a reader, I am less than satisfied about Hernández's ultimate purpose. Perhaps the idea is that not only are there unreliable narrators but also unreliable characters who think they are unreliable narrators.

Samuel Rutter's translation does raise some questions, too. To start with, the English version has excised a few paragraphs from the source text. The first significant omission occurs on page 13. It is a short paragraph where the mother describes Berta's angry reaction when she learns the painter has gifted her the watercolour painting that she had been staring at school when she fainted.

However, much more significant is the removal of two long paragraphs – close to forty lines (119 in the target text). These describe the many merits of the *real* Vicente Rojo, who was a Spanish-born painter. He exiled himself to Mexico in the wake of the Civil War and subsequently became an accomplished and much-admired painter there. His was the cover for the first edition of a contemporary classic: García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*).

It is hard to understand the decision to excise these two paragraphs. One can only presume this occurred as a result of editorial intervention rather than Rutter inexplicably slicing a small yet meaningful chunk off the original.

Apart from these omissions, there are a few other minor mistranslations. The first is an evident inconsistency. On page 18, Berta's mother explains how, after meeting the painter for the first time, stops at a café “de vuelta a casa” (i.e., “on my way home”) to order and eat a massive *merienda*. The English version incorrectly renders the phrase as “when I got home”. Moreover, Rutter simplifies the quintessentially Spanish *merienda* as a “meal”. Personally, I find the English short-changes the reader. The narrator has earlier placed emphasis on how overeating after the divorce has made put on weight. A late afternoon *merienda* will typically include a pastry and a mug of milk coffee, or even hot thick chocolate in the winter months.

Other minor mistakes include the reference to the painter's seeming reluctance to leave Mexico (“apenas salía de México”), which in the TL text becomes “he had only just left Mexico” (21). This is an important deviation from the original; it is an early warning about the questionable identity of the man who claims to be the renowned painter. Also, the “barracón” of the school Berta attends (i.e., the deplorable demountable or portable classroom, now almost an icon in far too many Australian schools) is oddly translated as “depot-like building” (8). And when Berta is being scolded by her mother about her inexplicable dislike for the old painter, trying to reason with her (“lo único que hizo fue ayudarte”, that is, “all he did was to help you”) is inaccurately conveyed by Rutter as “he was the only one who bothered to help you” (30).

Two editorial errors should be fixed in future reprints: “you could [see] the little hairs beginning to emerge” (99) and “I wasn't sure if she [was] seeking consolation” (100).

Notwithstanding the mostly unimportant mistranslations and the two lengthy omissions – rather baffling for contemporary editorial practices – Samuel Rutter's translation serves its

purpose. I'll admit Sònia Hernández's book did not make me rush to the bookshop in search of her other books. Other readers might relish this story more, though.

## Review of Kaja Malanowska's *Fog* (transl. Bill Johnston)

VESNA RAPAJIC

Malanowska, Kaja. *Fog*, translated by Bill Johnston. Text Publishing, 2021.

The third novel of a contemporary Polish author, Kaja Malanowska, is introduced for the first time in English as *Fog*, which, in Olga Tokarczuk's words on the cover, is "a crime novel for our times".

The novel is translated by Bill Johnston, a prominent translator of Polish literature into English. Johnston's translation opus consists of a long list of Polish literary works, both contemporary and classic. He is a professor of comparative literature at Indiana University and is a recipient of multiple awards, which include the PEN Translation Prize, the Best Translated Book Award, and he has been recognized in Poland for his significant contribution to the advancement of Polish literary culture in English. Johnston's translation of Malanowska's *Fog* is a work of exceptional quality.

What is interesting about this title, from the point of view of Australian readers, is that the project is originated by a Melbourne publisher, Text Publishing. To have an international author of such quality translated by a renowned literary translator and published in English locally is a rarity, which makes this volume that much more precious.

In her home country, Malanowska is known as a writer of quality literary fiction. She is the author of a critically acclaimed collection of short stories *Immigration (Imigracje)*, 2011). Her first novel *Small Madness of Everyday Life (Drobne szaleństwa dnia codziennego)*, 2010) saw her recognized as an author who deals with complex emotional and social issues while engaging in stylistic explorations, using illness journal and social media post forms. Her 2012 novel *Look at Me, Klara! (Patrz na mnie, Klara!)* was nominated for Polityka's Passport (Paszport Polytiki) and the prestigious Nike Literary Award, establishing her as a prominent contemporary voice. She has been a columnist for *Political Critique (Krytyka polityczna)*, a publication which promotes the work of public intellectuals, and has written articles on a range of issues, from bureaucratic absurdities related to reporting a stolen wallet, to experiences of gaining a teaching certificate while highly qualified, the dangers of riding a bicycle on Warsaw roads and footpaths with no bicycle lanes, and the implications of the overuse of antibiotics. All of these see her employ her piercing observations, sometimes interspersed with dialogue. She is a scientist with a PhD in bacterial genetics from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

With *Fog (Mgla* in the original) Malanowska turns to crime writing for the first time, following the conventions of the genre, while also staying true to her interest in the nuances of human character and explorations of broader social issues. At nearly 400 pages, this is a slow-burning crime procedural. The focus is on the absorbing story of the criminal investigation, while it also depicts contemporary Warsaw, its social fabric and the complicated lives of its characters. The themes explored within the central murder story include entrenched work sexism, domestic violence and sexual abuse at work, mental states in their variously functioning and debilitating forms, social isolation, prejudice related to class differences and immigrants, and they all contribute to the complex view of the contemporary society presented in this work.

Detectives Ada Rochniewicz and Marcin Sawicki are the police partners discovering the truth behind the murder of a young woman Zofia Wagner in her Warsaw apartment. Their work relationship follows the conventional trope of a mismatched duo, a talented female detective and her sceptical male partner; one which starts with Marcin's prejudice and reluctance, and Ada's indifference to it, to the one that eventually sees them recognize each other's qualities to reach a mutual understanding. Through the course of the investigation, we find out more about their lives: Marcin's neglect of himself and his family, his lonely wife whom he takes for granted and his two young daughters, with his marriage in tatters; and Ada's mysterious history which we only glimpse. Her relocation to Warsaw from another region appears to be due to a traumatic previous work experience, her nightmares and daytime visions, or "trances" as she calls them, are part of her make-up, which she is trying to keep in check, but which periodically surface, giving her insights into the murder story and various aspects of her own life. There is an unexplained difficult relationship with her father, and her estranged half-sister Kasia, with whom she reconnects during the course of the investigation.

The investigation takes various directions, from a predictable suspicion of Zofia's abandoned working-class lover, to her young Chechen cleaner, and associations with illegal immigrants and their perilous lives. There are sinister influences of a religious sect-like movement, and its impact on one family, including Zofia's past love, her former fiancé, as well as links to the political establishment.

The prose glides through all of these themes and events, and is seamlessly brought to life in English. The reader is aware of being immersed in this compelling world, while the deftness of expressions, the immediacy of the dialogue, the crafting of longer narrative passages are all rendered with skill. An occasional jolt is a crude joke, translated quite literally, but this serves to illustrate the cloistered police environment the reader is inhabiting.

The fog which envelops Warsaw during the course of the investigation, obscuring the city as well as the search for answers, adds a noir dimension to the narrative. It finally lifts when the crime is solved, and while the city transitions to a bright spring, the dark undercurrents which led to the murder of Zofia Wagner remain.

The author's biographical note mentions that she is working on a prequel to *Fog*, and it is to be hoped that the readers will be able to see that work in print soon, and that an English translation will also follow, one which will be of a similar calibre to this one.

## Translating Hybrid *Mahjar* Literature: Three Poems by Mikhail Naimy

GUITTA NJEIM

Between 1880 and 1914, an estimated one third of the total population of Greater Syria (present-day Syria, Lebanon, Occupied Palestine, and Jordan) emigrated to Egypt and the Americas (Khater 8). During that period, numerous authors from the Levantine area were producing what came to be known as *Mahjar*<sup>1</sup> literature. This period of intellectual awakening of the nineteenth century referred to as the *Nahḍa*<sup>2</sup> or *renaissance* of Arabic literature was a period of intellectual modernization that has transfigured Arabic literature for years to come. *Mahjar* authors were known to have freed themselves from the shackles of traditional Arabic poetry, rather finding inspiration in European Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, and to have favoured the use of “short metres and a lyrical and melancholic tone” (Khalifa 318).

Mikhail Naimy<sup>3</sup> (1889-1988) was a Lebanese philosophical essayist, novelist, and poet of the *Mahjar* school. Naimy was born in Baskinta, a village in Mount Lebanon, where he attended a school ran by Russian missionaries, which highly influenced him and led him to move to the Russian Teachers’ Institute in Nazareth at only thirteen to further his studies. Naimy later moved to Poltava, Ukraine to pursue his education, and then to New York, where alongside his fellow countrymen and *Mahjar* writers Gibran Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), Elia Abu Madi (1890-1957), and Ameen Rihani (1876-1940), he was member of *Al-Rabita Al-Qalamiyya*, also known as The Pen League.<sup>4</sup> The Arab-American literary society’s *raison d’être* was, in Naimy’s own words, “to lift Arabic literature from the quagmire of stagnation and imitation, and to infuse a new life into its veins so as to make of it an active force in the building up of the Arab nations and to promote a new generation of Arab writers” (Levinson and Ember 864). The Pen League dissolved with Gibran Kahlil Gibran’s death in 1931 and Naimy’s return to Lebanon in 1932. In a time of conflicting alliances in the Levantine area, the position of The Pen League was to encourage hybrid literature – a constructed form of literature drawing inspiration from the West – with the purpose of introducing Arab audiences to Western literary styles. In fact, The Pen League aimed at rethinking the form and essence of Arabic literature, using a simple language that is abundant with imagery and symbolism to meditate on the mysteries of existence, the elements of nature, and on values such as beauty, justice, love, and truth (Popp).

*Mahjar* writer Mikhail Naimy has left a legacy of forty-one published books. As a multilingual, Naimy often wrote in Arabic, Russian, and English. The literary output of the prolific writer includes novels like *Mudhakkirāt al-’Arqaš* (1948), translated by the author himself into English under the title *The Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul; or, the Pitted Face* (1952), as well as *The Book of Mirdad* (1948), written in English and later translated by Naimy into Arabic. The author is also known for writing Gibran Kahlil Gibran’s biography (1936), which

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<sup>1</sup> The term *mahjar* is a term derived from the Arabic word *hijra*, meaning migration, and comes from the root h-j-r, meaning to emigrate from one’s own land and take up residence in another country. Generally, the term *mahjar* means “country of emigration”, and it is used in the context of literature to refer to the *Mahjar* writers who had emigrated to America around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>2</sup> Derived from the Arabic root n-h-d which signifies “to rise”, “to stand up”, the term *nahḍa* refers to *Al-Nahḍah Al-Adabiyyah*, a nineteenth century Arabic literature movement inspired by encounters with the West.

<sup>3</sup> Penname used by the author whose name is also sometimes transliterated as *Mikhā’il Nu’aymah*.

<sup>4</sup> *Al-Rabita Al-Qalamiyya* is also sometimes referred to as The Pen Bond or The Pen Association.

he then translated into English. His other famous works include his memoirs titled *Sab'ūn: ḥikāyat 'umr* (1959-1960) or *Seventy: Story of a Lifetime, Al-Ghirbal* (1923) or *The Sieve*, a literary critical article, and a collection of poetry titled *Hams al-jufūn* (1928) or *Eyelid Whisperings*.

Mikhail Naimy's writings covered a plethora of topics ranging from war to the metaphysical nature of things. His output was also highly influenced by his personal experiences. Naimy's poem titled '*Akhi* (My Brother) was inspired by his deployment as an American soldier in World War I at the Normandy front to fight the Germans. During that period, Naimy realized the atrocities of war, while away from the famine that was ravaging Mount Lebanon<sup>5</sup> under the despotic rule of the Ottoman Empire. In that particular poem Naimy addresses his brother with a defeated tone, inviting him to bury the living, as war, drought, and famine have left no hope in the land. Naimy's writings also verge towards the mystical. In another poem titled *Man 'Antī Yā Nafsī?* (Who Are You My Self?), Naimy addresses the self in a state of awe and perplexity, personifying and glorifying it at the same time. His most famous philosophical work *The Book of Mirdad* (1948) describes the soothing presence of a God that is within, a notion often highlighted by Naimy who writes in his autobiography, "The war made me realize that there is no distance between the creator and the creatures" (M. Naimy 101). This Sufi<sup>6</sup> notion of unity with the Creator, known in Arabic as *Waḥdat al-wujūd* and often translated as Unity of Existence or Oneness of Being, is one of the key foundations of Naimy's philosophy. Many allusions to other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Sufism as well as the Orthodox Christianity of his upbringing, can also be found in his writings. In fact, Naimy grew disinterested in organized religion at an early age, in favour of an individual spiritual journey that encapsulates beliefs from different religions, both Eastern and Western. In fact, the writings of Mikhail Naimy, like those of his *Mahjar* peers, bridge the chasm between East and West, allowing readers to experience a hybrid literary genre that is marked by different creeds, cultures, identities, and literary traditions.

### **Arabic Literature and Poetry in Translation**

Translating literature is both a challenging and valuable endeavour. Peter Newmark notes that, unlike a non-literary piece of writing, a literary text with its connotations and stylistic features, serves as an allegory and an evaluation of society at a certain time and setting in history. To translate into another language is therefore also an attempt to transfer into another language-culture the author's set of beliefs and thoughts. Moreover, although translation inevitably entails the loss of certain aspects or connotations of an original, it allows the transfer of a piece of literature that would otherwise remain uncharted territory on account of the absence of fluency in a given language. Translators can therefore assume the role of mediators who attempt to bridge the linguistic gap, bringing two cultures closer and allowing an exchange of ideas and traditions. In fact, as Newmark notes, "the signal importance of the translation of some novels has been the introduction of a new vision injecting a different literary style into another language-culture" (111). This is the case of the *Mahjar* school, which has infused both Arabic and English traditions into literary texts.

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<sup>5</sup> The Great Famine of Lebanon (1915-1918) was the result of several factors, both political and environmental. Although the lack of consensus makes it difficult to measure the precise number of casualties, historians believe the death toll to be as high 200,000 deaths, that is half the population of Mount Lebanon at the time.

<sup>6</sup> Sufism or *tasawwuf* is the mystical Islamic belief in which believers seek to find truth and knowledge through a direct and personal experience of God.

Arabic and English are two languages that do not belong to the same family. In fact, Arabic with its roots and patterns system can be described as a language with a very rich and nuanced lexicon. Most literary texts are written in what is known as Modern Standard Arabic, which is the standardized, written form of the language. This has left Arabic-speaking nations in a state of diglossia, in which the written and spoken forms diverge to a great extent, and it has left translators with many issues related to register and equivalence. Moreover, from a linguistic perspective, Arabic and English are two languages that present different stylistic features. In Arabic, verbal sentences are more recurrent than nominal sentences and are written in the following order: Verb-Subject-Object, with the possibility of omitting the subject, or changing the word order to stress a certain element. While English is believed to use T-units (main clauses) that are more complex, Arabic tends to rely on coordinated T-units “as a stylistic character of its prose writing style” (Obeidat 5). Many linguistic features thus differentiate Arabic from other languages. However, the issue of cultural differences remains an important hindrance to the transfer of meaning when translating from Arabic. In fact, cultural differences constitute the main reason behind what is known as a lexical gap or “the absence of a hypothetical word which would seem to fit naturally into the pattern exhibited by existing words” (Trask 157). A lexical gap, also known as *lacuna*, is especially prevalent in religious and scientific texts and gives rise to untranslatability (Obeidat). Since Arabic literature often comprises intertextual allusions to religious texts and culture-specific terms and concepts, untranslatability can be a challenge for the translator seeking to translate Arabic literary texts into another language.

When the literary text in question is Arabic poetry, many are the challenges that face the translator. In addition to their aesthetic dimension, Arabic poems can also be of religious or philosophical nature, which brings us back to the issue of untranslatability. Classical Arabic poetry, that is the poetry written before the *Nahḍa* period, was written in vertical lines consisting of two parts each and was characterized by its complex structure and vocabulary. On the other hand, *Mahjar* poetry, classified as modern poetry, differs greatly from its predecessor in form and content. In fact, *Mahjar* poets often used several metres and verse forms within the same poem, which allows a bigger margin for experimentation on the part of translators.

### **Translating Naimy’s Poetry**

*Hams al-jufūn* (Eyelid Whisperings) was published in Beirut in 1943 and contains thirty poems written in Arabic and published in America between 1917 and 1928, as well as fourteen prose translations of poems originally written in English. After reading Naimy’s collection, I selected three poems, which I felt reflected the author’s style and register very well. Naimy, like other *Mahjar* poets, is known for his Tolstoian spiritualization of nature. In each of the three poems chosen for translation, the elements of nature are depicted in a way that suits the author’s inner thoughts and emotions.

In “Close Your Eyes and You Shall See,” “clouds” and “snow” are used as an allegory for the hardships of life, while, in contrast, “stars” and “meadows” are used as a symbol of beauty, guidance, and fertility. For this reason, in the English translation, I added some parts in the case of “stars to guide you” and the adjectives “grey” to “clouds” and “green” to “meadows” to make explicit the image that the author wants to paint. In fact, clouds could symbolize purity or divine mystery in certain cultures, whereas the verb used in Arabic, *talabbada*, is in the reflexive form *tafa‘ala*, suggesting intensity and heaviness due to the doubled letter ‘*ayn*. Overall, I opted for a communicative translation. With the purpose of achieving a translation that could pass off as an original and that would feel less wordy or foreign to the target reader, I replaced what would otherwise be literally rendered as “behind



the clouds” with “therebehind” and “under the snow” with “thereunder.” The repetition of words in Arabic is a rhetorical device called *tikrār*. While *tikrār* (repetition) and *’itnāb* (redundancy) are two rhetorical devices used deliberately in Arabic to the advantage of the meaning, they could feel redundant when used in another language. At the level of tone, I tried to find equivalents in English to vehiculate the philosophical message of the poem in a form that would feel familiar to the reader. I also managed to recreate the same scheme of rhymes in English (AABBCCDD), albeit with imperfect rhymes.

Nature in the second poem “My Brother” is represented as a desolate place where the corpses of those left for dead are scattered where once stood crops. The third line of the third stanza depicts how nature (in the form of drought) and man (in the form of war foes) leave farmers with barren lands. The poem is written in a defeated tone, suggesting great distress and complete loss of hope. As far as the conditional sentences are concerned, I chose to repeat the conjunction “if” where in Arabic the two conditional clauses were joined by the particle of conjunction *wāw*. I also added “then” before introducing the main clauses in English in order to make the progression of thoughts slightly clearer to the reader and to stress the conditional. In fact, the particularity of this poem lies in the use of the conditional that creates a sense of us-versus-them, highlighting social inequalities and dichotomizing the winning vs. the losing parties, the hungry and destitute farmers vs. the acclaimed war veterans, and so on. At the lexical level, I had recourse to compensation in the translation of the word *khullān* from the singular *khalīl*, which refers to a loyal and trustworthy friend. In order to fill the lexical gap, I added the adjective “loyal” to the word “friend,” which, on its own, fails to convey the nuances of the original. At the recurrence of the word, I opted for “confidants,” both to achieve an imperfect rhyme with the word “homeland” and to avoid redundancy. At the level of tone, I tried to convey the author’s pessimism in the third stanza by opting for the verb “rebuild” instead of “build” and added the time conjunction “once” to the verb “ruined.” Like in the first poem, I tried to find equivalents in English that would convey the air of despondency that is prevalent in the original. I avoided repeating the same word in different lines of the same stanza, with the exception of the fourth stanza, which was the most difficult to translate. Ultimately, I chose to reformulate the original and kept the repetition of “to come to pass” and “to befall,” which breaks the pattern of avoiding *tikrār* (repetition) in translation.

In the third selected poem “Who Are You, Myself?”, the author addresses himself in search for a demystifying answer as to the nature of his being. In the original, it is clear that the poem is addressed to the author’s self since Arabic is a gendered language, meaning that, unlike English, verb, noun, and adjectives are either masculine or feminine. The word *naḥsī* (myself) is a feminine word, which is why it is clear that the verbs in the main clauses of the conditional sentences in the original refer to it, since their conjugation is altered accordingly. In order to avoid ambiguity in English, I added “Myself,” in the beginning as a way to make explicit the addressee of the poem. Unlike the first poem where the conditional is hypothetical, in this poem, I opted for the use of “when” to render the certainty of the particle of condition *’in*, which introduces observations made by the author with regard to himself. At the lexical level, I tried to diversify the terms referring to the same natural element (wave/tide, sea/ocean, tune/melody) to avoid the production of a redundant text in English. The poem contains a religious allusion in the fourth stanza. The expression used in Arabic literally means “as a prophet upon whom inspiration fell down from above.” The word *wahī* used in Arabic refers to divine inspiration. To make the translation more accessible to foreign readers while keeping a foreign sense to it, I chose to translate it as “like a prophet upon whom revelation descended,” thereby substituting “inspiration” with “revelation,” and producing a hybrid translation that captures both cultures; the Arab with the verb “descend,” typically used to describe the descent of the Holy Quran, and the Western with the word “revelation,” which is typically used to refer

to divine communication. The original poem is written in free-verse form, and the scheme of rhymes was uneven in my translation. This poem is a good example of the underdone of Naimy's poetry, in that it reflects an inner conflict between idealistic and rational aspirations. In the seventh and final stanza, the author's personal quest ends with the realization that the self is, in the true spirit of the Sufi Oneness of Being, part of an interconnected ecosystem that is created by "an invisible hand." The logical reasoning of the poet culminates in a spiritual answer to his questions, exuding a sense of calm and peace in the final stanza and putting his inner dilemma to bed. The author concludes by addressing his self, in a lucid and triumphant tone, to proclaim: "You are wind and breeze. You are waves, you are sea. You are lightning, you are thunder, you are night, you are dawn. You are an overflow from a divinity!" I opted to mimic the original poem by not adding the article "the" to the elements listed by the author, in order to replicate the staccato effect produced in the original through the unconventional listing of nouns without linking them with the conjunction *wāw*. I also believe this could render the sense of glorification of the self, which is created in the original through use of indefinite nouns in the *nakira* form.

Almost one century later, the poems found in Naimy's *Hams al-jufūn* (Eyelid Whispers) still hold an enriching and insightful literary significance. Translating the three selected poems was a very pleasant experience, and I hope it can offer readers insight on the *Mahjar* literary tendencies and an overview of some of the issues involved when translating from Arabic. *Mahjar* literature, which is characterized by its position at a crossroads between East and West, constitutes a unique literary school that deserves more attention from Arab, diasporic, and foreign audiences alike. This type of hybrid literature remains of utmost importance in a time where xenophobia and cultural imperialism are on the rise. It can also serve as an example for translators seeking to produce translations in which, rather than competing with one another, identities can coexist in harmony.

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Selected poems by Mikhail Naimy

Selected poems by Mikhail Naimy

Translated by Guitta Njeim

أغمض عينيك تبصر

إذا سماؤك يوماً ... تحجبت بالغيوم  
أغمض جفونك تبصر ... خلف الغيوم نجوم  
والأرض حولك إما ... توشحت بالثلوج  
أغمض جفونك تبصر ... تحت الثلوج مروج  
وإن بليت بداء ... وقيل داء عياء  
أغمض جفونك تبصر في الداء كل الدواء  
وعندما الموت يدنو ... واللحد يفغر فاه  
أغمض جفونك تبصر ... في اللحد مهد الحياة

Close Your Eyes and You Shall See

If one day grey clouds fill the sky above you  
Close your eyelids, and you shall see  
therebehind stars to guide you  
And if the earth under your feet is clothed  
with snows  
Close your eyelids, and you shall see  
thereunder green meadows  
If you are afflicted with an ailment, one said  
to be incurable for sure  
Close your eyelids, and you shall see in the  
ailment the remedy and the cure  
And when death rears its head, and the grave  
opens its mouth to swallow you whole  
Close your eyelids, and you shall see, in the  
grave, the cradle of your soul

أخي

أخي، إن ضجَّ بعدَ الحربِ غربيُّ بأعماله  
وقدَّسَ ذكراً من ماتوا وعظَّم بطشَ أبطاله  
فلا تهزجْ لمن سادوا، ولا تشمتْ بمن دانا  
بل اركعْ صامتاً مثلي بقلبٍ خاشعٍ دام  
لنبيكي حظَّ موتانا

\*

أخي، إن عادَ بعدَ الحربِ جنديٌّ لأوطانه  
وألقي جسمه المنهوك في أحضانِ جلائئه،  
فلا تطلبْ إذا ما عُدتْ للأوطانِ خلانا  
لأنَّ الجوعَ لم يتركْ لنا صحباً نناجيهم

My Brother

My brother, if after the war, a Westerner  
boasted his deeds before his fellows,  
If he revered the mention of those who died  
and exalted the cruelty of his heroes,  
Then chant not for the victors and rejoice  
not at the misfortune of the losers,  
But rather bow down in silence, like me,  
with a heart that is bleeding and feeble  
So that we can lament the fate of our dead  
people

\*

My brother, if after the war, a soldier  
returned to his homeland,  
If he rested his worn body in the arms of his  
loyal friends,  
Then ask not, if you return to the homeland,  
for confidants  
For hunger has left us no friends to talk to  
Save for the ghosts of our dead people

سوى أشباح موتانا

\*

\*

أخي، إن عادَ يحرث أرضه الفلّاحُ أو يزرعُ

ويبني بعد طولِ الهجر كوحًا هدّه المدفع

فقد جفّت سواقينا وهَدَّ الذلُّ مأوانا

ولم يترك لنا الأعداءَ غرسًا في أراضينا

سوى أجياف موتانا

\*

أخي، قد تمَّ ما لو لم نشأه نحن ما تمّا

وقد عمَّ البلاءُ، ولو أردنا نحن ما عمّا

فلا تندبْ، فأذنْ الغير لا تُصغي لشكوانا

بل اتبعني لنحفر خندقًا بالرفش والمعوّل

نوارى فيه موتانا

\*

أخي، من نحن؟ لا وطنٌ ولا أهلٌ ولا جارُ

إذا نمنا، إذا قمنا، ردانا الخزي والعارُ

لقد حَمَّتْ بنا الدنيا كما حَمَّتْ بموتانا.

فهات الرفشَ واتبعني لنحفر خندقًا آخر

نوارى فيه أحيانًا...

مَنْ أَنْتِ يَا نَفْسِي؟

إن رأيتَ البحرَ يطغى الموجُ فيه ويثورُ،

أو سمعتَ البحرَ يبكي عند أقدام الصخور،

My brother, if the farmer returns to  
ploughing or cultivating his land,  
If after a long exile, he rebuilds a shack once  
ruined by the ordnance,

Then our streamlets have run dry and  
humiliation has defiled our homes  
And foes have left us no plants growing in  
our soil

Save for the corpses of our dead people

\*

My brother, it has come to pass, and not  
without our consent has it come to pass  
Distress has befallen us, and had we wished  
for the contrary, it would have never  
befallen us

Therefore, wail not, for the ears of others do  
not listen to our grievances

But rather, follow me and let us dig a trench  
with our pick and shovel

In which we can burry our dead people

\*

My brother, who are we? No homeland, no  
relatives, and no neighbours  
Whether asleep or awake, disgrace and  
shame are the garments covering our figures  
Life has marred us as it has marred our dead  
people

Therefore, hand me the shovel and follow  
me

So that we may dig another trench  
In which we can burry our living people

### Who Are You, Myself?

Myself,

When you see the turbulent ocean with its  
angry waves, rising

ترقبني الموج إلى أن يحبس الموج هديره  
وتتاجي البحر حتى يسمع البحر زفيره  
راجعاً منك إليه.

هل من الأمواج جئت؟

\*

إن سمعت الرعد يدوي بين طبّات الغمام  
أو رأيت البرق يفري سيفه جيش الظلام،  
ترصدي البرق إلى أن تخطف منه لظاه،  
ويكف الرعد لكن تاركاً فيك صداه.

هل من البرق انفصلت؟

أم مع الرعد انحدرت؟

\*

إن رأيت الريح تذري الثلج عن روس الجبال،  
أو سمعت الريح تعوي في الدجى بين التلال،

تسكن الريح وتبقي باشتياقٍ صاغية

وأناديك ولكن أنت عني قاصيه

في محيطٍ لا أراه.

هل من الريح وُلدت؟

\*

إن رأيت الفجر يمشي خلسةً بين النجوم

ويؤشّي جبة الليل المولي بالرسوم،

يسمع الفجر ابتهالاً صاعداً منك إليه

وتخزي كنبّي هبط الوحي عليه

بخشوعٍ جائيّه.

هل من الفجر انبثقت؟

\*

Or hear the sea at the feet of the rocks,  
wailing,  
You watch the waves till the tides mute their  
murmuring  
And you call upon the sea till it hears its  
own exhaling  
From you to it, returning.  
Is it from the tides that you have come?

\*

When you hear the thunder, between the  
layered clouds, echoing  
Or see the sword of lightning ripping  
through the pitch darkness,  
You observe the lightning till you rob it of  
its flame brightly burning,  
And the thunder ceases, leaving, however,  
its echo within you.  
Did you part from the lightning?  
Or is it with the thunder that you have come  
down?

\*

When you see the wind scattering the snow  
from the mountaintops  
Or hear the wind in the dead of night,  
between the hills, howling,  
The wind abates while you wait, longing,  
listening  
And I call you, but you are distant from me  
In an ocean I do not see.  
Is it from the wind that you were born?

\*

When you see the dawn, between the stars,  
stealthily walking  
Adorning the cape of the night that is  
leaving,  
The dawn hears a plea from you to it,  
ascending  
And you bow your knees like a prophet  
upon whom revelation descended, kneeling.  
Is it from the dawn that you have emerged?

\*

إن رأيت الشمسَ في حوضِ المياه الزاخرة  
ترمق الأرضَ وما فيها بعينٍ ساحره،  
تهجع الشمسُ وقلبي يشتهي لو تهجعتُ،  
وتنام الأرضُ لكن أنت يقظى ترقبين  
مضجعَ الشمسِ البعيدِ.  
هل من الشمسِ هبطتِ؟

\*

إن سمعتِ البُلبُلَ الصّدَاحَ بين الياسمينِ  
يسكب الألحانَ نارًا في قلوب العاشقين،  
تلتظي حزنًا وشوقًا، والهوى عنك بعيدُ  
فاخبريني، هل غنا البلبُل في الليل يُعيد  
ذكرَ ماضيكِ إليك؟  
هل من الألحانِ أنتِ؟

\*

إيه يا نفسي! أنتِ لحنٌ فيَّ قد رنَّ صداه  
وقَعَّتْكَ يدُ فنانٍ خفي لا أراه.  
أنتِ ريحٌ ونسيمٌ، أنتِ موجٌ، أنتِ بحرٌ،  
أنتِ برقٌ، أنتِ رعدٌ، أنتِ ليلٌ، أنتِ فجرٌ  
أنتِ فيضٌ من إله!

When you see the sun in the bosom of the  
water that is abounding,  
Glaring at the Earth and all that which it  
contains, with eyes that are bewildering,  
The sun retires and my heart desires your  
retiring,  
The Earth slumbers, but you are awake,  
observing  
The sun's distant place of resting.  
Is it from the sun that you have descended?

\*

When you hear the songbird chirping  
between the jasmine flowers  
Pouring tunes in the hearts of lovers,  
Setting them ablaze, while you, distant from  
Love, are burning with the fire of sadness  
and longing  
Tell me, does the singing of the songbird in  
the night retribute the remembrance of your  
past to you?  
Is it from tunes that you are made?

\*

O myself! You are a melody within me,  
echoing,  
Signed by the hand of an invisible artist I do  
not see.  
You are wind and breeze  
You are waves, you are sea  
You are lightning, you are thunder, you are  
night, you are dawn  
You are an overflow from a divinity!

## Macchiette (Shades of light)

MATILDA COLAROSSO

Grazia Deledda was born in Nuoro, Sardinia on September 27, 1871. At the age of eleven, her formal education ended (“I was eleven and in grade four, for the second time, not because I had failed, but because at the time, in my small town of Nuoro, there was no higher grade for girls in elementary school.”), but Grazia Deledda continued her studies, and she did so first with an Italian professor and then, in secret, on her own because her family greatly disapproved, telling her often: “you will never grow up, and never be good at anything because you read too much...”.

Notwithstanding their views, Grazia Deledda never stopped reading and never stopped writing; and, one day, encouraged by her teacher, she sent her work to a Roman journal, and it was accepted. In a brief memoir called *The azure veil*, from the book *Nell'azzurro, Novelline* (1890), which is almost impossible to find today, though fortunately, I found republished in the book *Onoranze a Grazia Deledda*, (1959) published by the town of Nuoro to honour the author, she states:

I was thirteen; I had already written a book, which is easy at that age; and I had found a publisher—which is even difficult for older authors—who would pay me! The title of the book was *Nell'azzurro*, short stories for children. I can't remember the stories—I've forgotten so many, even the more recent ones!—but I remember that the publisher sent me the proofs in an envelope he had written himself, and I cherished those long strips of frayed paper, and I kept them in a drawer, convinced they were a gift from my Patron, but I couldn't understand why they were printed so strangely: some were covered densely from top to bottom, others were just half a page long, and others still held only a few lines.

Dear me! I had never seen a proof before, and no one I knew could explain what I had hidden in my drawer, like a farmer near his breast, a viper in my bosom. But the editor sent other proofs with question marks, which began to worry me. What was I supposed to do? I wrote back saying I had received them. My Patron answered, a bit sarcastically, that not even Carducci took so long to correct proofs: he suggested I send the corrections if I wanted the project to move forward.

And I corrected: erasing, adding, but I did it in the “body” of the proofs, not in the margins! And the short stories were published with the printing errors, errors which, together with the original ones, got me the indelible reputation for being the most ungrammatical writer in Europe.

Unstoppable, determined, convinced that literature was her calling, Grazia Deledda went on to write novels, short stories, and poems; she produced theatrical works, essays, articles, children's stories, and even dabbled in translation (a work by the young French poet Camille Mauclair and the novel *Eugénie Grandet* by Honoré de Balzac<sup>1</sup>). She depicted her adored Sardinia in words that expressed all her talent and all her love for her homeland; and in 1926, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature—the first and only Italian woman to receive this prize—and the committee explained their choice with these words: “for her idealistically

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<sup>1</sup> Published in the series «Biblioteca romantica» by Mondadori in 1930 under the title *Eugenia Grandet*.



inspired writings which with plastic clarity picture the life on her native island and with depth and sympathy deal with human problems in general” (“The Nobel Prize in Literature 1926”).

Indeed, her extensive work was born of a desire to recount the world around her, the simple world of the ordinary people of her homeland; and it was her ability to portray that world that made her the great Italian author she is. And yet, Grazia Deledda has been almost completely forgotten. Of her numerous works, many have been lost, and only five books have been translated: Why? Why has this incredible woman, a woman who was ahead of her time, who was self-taught, who lived for literature, played a secondary role in world literature? I can find no answer and can only hope this will change.

The short work I have chosen to translate is called “Macchiette” from the collection of short stories *Racconti sardi* (Sardinian tales) published in 1894.

There are so many views on translation methods and I feel that every translator must choose the one they find most suited to their personal tastes. That does not mean that all translations are perfect, but rather that no translations are. Dante Alighieri was convinced that nothing harmonized musically could be translated without destroying the harmony. Giovanni Pascoli talked of translation in terms of an inside and an outside (where the inside, the soul, should remain the same and the outside change, like clothing) (261); Luigi Pirandello thought translation was like taking a tree from one terrain and planting it in a foreign one where the leaves and flowers (the words) “although never the same again” would have to rustle and shine in their new “ideal aura”, because, he said, “the more we try to make it preserve its original luxuriance, the more pitiable and scant it will appear...” (115); Antonio Gramsci said that to be able to translate it was not enough to translate literally but to know the terminology of the culture of both languages to provide each culture with an understanding of the other; Benedetto Croce spoke of translation as something that “diminishes or spoils [...] putting the original in a melting pot and mixing it with the personal impressions of the person we call translator” (76); Valerio Magrelli describes translation with a “minus one rule”, where at least one thing must be lost for it to be translation, and he uses the anecdote of Abbè Galiani, an eighteenth century Italian philosopher who stated that when we bow to one rich man we are inevitably turning our backs on another.

I agree, in part, with all these theories. I believe that translation means taking a tree and moving it to a new place and using the tools at our disposal (our ability to write in the target language) to make it rustle and shine, and that by trying to keep the original form, the original luxuriance, we inevitably make it pitiable, and so, we must change the outside, the clothes, and leave the inside, the soul. I believe that knowing the words of a language without the culture behind those words is useless. I certainly believe that something is always lost, especially in poetry where to respect one literary device, you must almost always lose another, and that perhaps by bowing to one man (striving to achieve one thing, whether that means the literary devices, intent, syntax, etc.) we inevitably turn our backs to another. However, I don’t believe that translation diminishes or spoils the original; and I don’t think that by translating something harmonized musically the harmony will necessarily be lost. If that were the case Grazia Deledda’s work could never be translated well and that would be a terrible shame; her landscapes would remain accessible only to Italians, and that would be dreadful; and I would not be able to present “Macchiette” here.

“*Macchiette*” presents difficulties from the very start: how do we translate the title? I decided to leave it in Italian.

*Macchiette* literally mean small splotches, stains or spots, sketches, or copses. It is also the root of the word “*Macchiaioli*”; and so I understood the text to be Deledda’s way of ‘painting’, in different moments of the day, the land she loved so much: like the *Macchiaioli*, whose paintings are “*macchie*” of colour, of light—where beauty lies in the contrast between light and shade, and everything is absolutely realistic. So, this piece too is all light and shade.

It is more like poetry than prose, and in it, Grazia Deledda paints one day in Sardinia: the domestic scenes, the landscapes, the homes, family life. She gives the reader a glimpse of that life, takes us there, invites us to live that day with her.

She expresses the day in five different scenes: the break of day, noontide, sunset, night, and late night; she depicts these five moments of the day like a *Macchiaiolo* would paint the scene. And the effect is magnificent, and poetic, and her words are strokes of colour and *macchie* of light; and, as in a painting, everything is measured, vivid, perfectly expressed. She uses numerous poetic devices to achieve the perfect picture: visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and kinaesthetic imagery, similes, metaphors, assonance, alliteration, consonance, personification and so on until we visualize her Sardinian day so perfectly that we feel as if we have visited the land and met the people. We feel the heat and shiver in the dark; we feel the young girl's lethargy, and the young lady's piety; we wonder about the man and woman in costume (Were they together? Does it matter?); and we are enlightened by what she says about the little shepherd boy at the very end of the work, about his poetic essence there, alone among the deserted plains.

These glimpses of life, these *macchie* of light were beautiful to read and difficult to translate because once I read them I knew exactly what I had experienced but could not possibly be sure I could make others experience it too in "another terrain". For a translator can sometimes be blinded by the original; we may, therefore, have to walk in the darkness, groping for words that will bring a similar light to others.

So, something was, perhaps, lost and something wasn't, perhaps, as harmonic; but all I can hope is that this new "tree", different but similar, can touch heartstrings like it did mine.

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**Macchiette**  
**(da Racconti sardi 1894)**

**Grazia Deledda**

I.

Albeggia. Sul cielo azzurro cinereo d'una dolcezza triste e profonda, curvato sull'immenso paesaggio silenzioso, passano sfiorando larghi meandri di un rosa pallidissimo, via via sfumanti nell'orizzonte ancora oscuro. Grandi vallate basse, ondegianti, uniformi, s'inseguono sin dove arriva lo sguardo, chiazzate d'ombra, selvaggie e deserte. Non un casolare, un albero, una greggia, una via.

Solo viottoli dirupati, muricciuoli cadenti coperti di musco giallo, un rigagnolo dalle acque color di cenere stagnanti fra giunchi di un verde nero desolato, e bassi roveti, estese macchie di lentischio le cui foglie riflettono la luce cilestrina dell'alba. Dietro, sull'altezza bruna del nord biancheggiano grandi rupi di granito grigio e la cinta di un cimitero.

La croce nera disegnata sul cielo sempre più roseo, domina le vallate deserte: e pare l'emblema del triste paesaggio senza vita stendentesi silenzioso sotto la curva del cielo azzurro-cinereo. Albeggia.

II.

Sotto il bagliore ardente della meriggiana la cantoniera bianca dal tetto rosso, tace, dorme: le finestre verdi guardano pensose sullo stradale bruciato dal sole, e giù dal cornicione di un turchino slavato calano frangie d'ombra d'una freschezza indescrivibile. Lo stradale bianchissimo, disabitato, dai mucchi di ghiaja sprizzanti scintille al sole, serpeggia per una vasta pianura coperta di boschi di soveri.

In lontananza, alte montagne a picco, velate di vapori azzurri e ardenti, chiudono in circolo l'orizzonte infuocato. Sotto l'aria ferma, irrespirabile, nello splendore piovente dal cielo di metallo, i soveri nani,

**Macchiette**  
**[Shades of Light]**  
**(from Racconti sardi 1894)**  
**Grazia Deledda**

**Translated by Mati Colarossi**

I.

Day breaks. In the ashen, azure sky, sadly gentle and profound, arched over the immense silent landscape, pale pink meanders sweep past, dissolving ever more slowly into the still, obscure horizon. Great low hills, rolling, uniform, chase each other for as far as the eye can see, splotched in shade, wild and deserted. No farmhouse, or tree, or flock, or road.

Only rocky paths, walls in ruins covered in yellow moss, a rivulet of stagnant, ash-coloured waters among the desolate, green-black rushes, and low brambles, and stretches of mastic trees whose leaves reflect the pale blue light of dawn. In the background, along the brownish northern summits, great crags of grey granite and the walls of a cemetery gleam white.

The black cross etched against the ever more rose-coloured sky dominates the deserted valley: and it seems to be the symbol of the sad, lifeless landscape stretched silently under the arch of the ashen, azure sky. Day breaks.

II.

Under the fiery glow of noontide, the white roadman's house with its red roof is silent, dozing: the green windows look pensively onto the sun-scorched road, and down from the faded turquoise cornice hang fringes of shade of indescrivable freshness. The extremely white road, uninhabited, with its piles of pebbles flickering sparks in the sun, snakes through a vast plain covered in cork tree woods.

In the distance, tall, sheer mountains, veiled in vapours azure and ardent, close the blazing horizon in a ring. Under the still air, heavy, in the cascading splendour of the metallic sky, the low luxuriant cork trees

lussureggianti, proiettano corte penombre verdastre sul suolo arido, sui massi, tappezzati di borraccine morbide come peluche. Una fanciulla è coricata appunto su uno di questi massi, supina, le braccia e le gambe semi-nude.

La sua persona esile e ben fatta spicca sul verde tenero di quel tappeto naturale, e i fiori rossi di broccato del suo corsetto un pò lacero sanguinano nella penombra del bosco. Nel caldo asfissiante del meriggio, nel costume consunto e misero, stuona meravigliosamente la carnagione della fanciulla, di una bianchezza fenomenale, tanto più che sotto il fazzoletto giallo si vedono dei capelli nerissimi, e sotto le palpebre stanche due occhi di un nero cenerognolo foschi e impenetrabili. — Chi è? — Impossibile saperlo: ella non fa il minimo movimento nel languore spossato del caldo, e forse sogna, forse dorme, bianca e silente come la cantoniera vicina, sotto il bagliore ardente della meriggiana.

### III.

Il sole tramonta: dal villaggio in festa giunge un rumore confuso, vago e lontano, sino alla stanzetta tranquilla della casa del contadino.

La finestra è aperta sul poggiuolo di mattoni crudi su cui tremola alla brezza del tramonto una povera pianticella di basilico, che pare sorrida anch'essa, benchè sola e dimenticata, fra la letizia dei casolari neri e del cielo d'oro. Oh, i luminosi orizzonti! — La vallata verde circonda il villaggio, e la vegetazione in fiore olezza e risplende fra la nebbia ignea del sole al declino.

Dal piccolo poggiuolo di mattoni crudi si domina una viuzza strettissima e altre casette piccine, annerite dal tempo, i tetti muschiosi, via salienti sino al vecchio maniero spagnuolo, la cui facciata di stile moresco rosseggia in viso all'ovest, gli spalti cadenti perduti fra gli splendori del cielo, come il ricordo della triste dominazione aragonese nella luce dei nuovi tempi. — Nella casetta più vicina al poggiuolo la porticina nera è chiusa, ma al di fuori sta

project short greenish shadows onto the arid soil, onto the boulders upholstered in moss as soft as fur. A girl is lying on one of those boulders, on her back, her arms and legs half-bare.

Her slight, well-proportioned figure stands out against that soft, green, natural carpet, and the red brocade flowers of her somewhat tattered bodice bleed out into the dim light of the woods. In the asphyxiating midday heat, in her worn and tattered costume, the girl's complexion, of a phenomenal whiteness, stands out magnificently, more so because, from under her yellow headscarf, tufts of extremely black hair can be seen and, under her heavy eyelids, two cloudy black eyes, dark and impenetrable. — Who is she? — Impossible to say: she doesn't make the slightest movement in the drowsy languor of the heat, and maybe she is dreaming, maybe she is asleep, white and silent like the nearby roadman's house, under the fiery glow of noontide.

### III.

The sun sets: from the festive village a confused, vague and distant din rises up to the silent room of the farmer's house.

The window is open onto a raw brick terrace on which a poor little basil plant trembles in the evening wind; it too seems to be smiling, although alone and forgotten, amid the bliss of the black farmhouses and the golden sky. Oh, the luminous horizons! — The green valley surrounds the village, and the blooming vegetation smells sweet, and it gleams in the igneous fog of the setting sun.

The small raw brick terrace overlooks an extremely narrow lane and other tiny houses, blackened by time, with moss-ridden roofs that climb to the old Spanish castle, whose Moorish-style façade blushes red as it faces the west, whose falling bastions are lost amid the splendours of the sky, like the memory of the sad Aragonese domination in the light of recent times. — In the house nearest the terrace, the small black door is closed, but a crown of dry figs is hanging on

appesa una corona di fichi dissecantisi e sul davanzale della finestruola un gatto dalla schiena tutta abbruciata contempla solennemente sulla via, dove passa solo una donnina in costume, dal viso color di rame, allacciandosi bene il corsetto di panno giallo e di velluto viola cesellato. Dentro la stanzetta del poggiuolo un giovine, anch'esso in costume, piglia il caffè. Ha posato la chichera verde sulla cappa di una specie di vecchio camino, e ritto dando le spalle alla finestra, beve a centellini la prediletta bevanda.

È malato, ma sul suo viso biondo, pallidissimo, da convalescente, sta dipinta un'intima voluttà, il benessere di chi si riaffaccia pieno di speranza alla vita, dopo una lunga malattia. — Il letto di legno, dalle coperte di percalle a fiorami arabeschi, basso e duro ma con una fisionomia tranquilla, tipica, diremo quasi sonnolenta, le sedie grigie, il rozzo guardaroba rosso, la cassa nera di legno scolpito a strani fiori e animali antediluviani, la tavola coperta da un tappeto bianco, adorna di vassoi e chicchere, tutto sorride intorno al giovine contadino convalescente, nella pace beata della povertà felice, nella luminosità del tramonto di rosa. In alto, sulle pareti tinte di calce, una innumerevole fila di quadretti a vivi colori scintillano soavemente nel polviscolo d'oro, e i vecchi vetri della finestra ardono come lastre di orpello al riflesso del sole che tramonta.

#### IV.

E cade la notte! Nella chiesa miracolosa, nel famoso santuario ove la folla immensa è passata senza lasciare traccia alcuna, la penombra si addensa, livida, fredda e piena di mistero.

In fondo, dai finestroni bizantini, piove un acuto albore azzurro sul pavimento di mattoni a mosaico il cui smalto ha vaghi riflessi d'acqua stagnante: in alto, sull'altare bianco, una lampada di cristallo vermiglio spande tremoli chiarori rossastri che scendono e salgono sui fiori pallidi, sui candelabri dorati, sulle colonnine doriche di diaspro della nicchia coperta da un

the outside, and on the window ledge a cat with a singed back is solemnly contemplating the lane where, one sole, bronze-faced woman in Sardinian costume is passing; she is buttoning her bodice of yellow flannel and violet ciselé. Inside the little room off the terrace, a young man, also in costume, is having coffee. He has set the green saucer on the mantel of what looks like an old fireplace, and standing there with his back to the window, he sips the cherished drink slowly.

He is ill, but depicted on his blond, pale, invalid's face there is secret pleasure, the wellbeing of one who looks upon life full of hope again, after a long illness. — The wooden bed, with its gingham bedspread covered in arabesque flowers, is low and solid but comfortable looking, typical, almost drowsy, we may say; the grey chairs, the rough red wardrobe, the black chest with its strange chiselled flowers and antediluvian animals, the linen-covered table adorned with cups and saucers, everything is cheery around the young convalescent in the blissful peace of that contented poverty, in the luminosity of that sunset of pink. High up, on the whitewashed walls, an endless row of lively coloured frames shimmer softly among the golden specks of dust, and the weathered window panes burn like spangled bands in the reflection of the sun as it sets.

#### IV.

And night falls! In the miraculous church, in the famous sanctuary where the immense crowd has passed without leaving even the smallest trace, the half-shade becomes denser, livid, cold and full of mystery.

At the back, from the large Byzantine windows, an acute azure pallor rains onto the brick mosaic floor whose glaze has vague reflections of stagnant water: above, on the white altar, a vermilion crystal lamp spreads tremulous reddish beams that fall and rise on the pale flowers, on the golden candelabras, on the Doric columns of jasper in the niche

panneggiamento cereo a mazzetti azzurri, di damasco.

Superbe trecce nere, tutte nere, narratrici di romanzi e di drammi immani o pietosi, — gioielli d'oro e d'argento, stupende membra di cera, mani di vergini cristiane di una suprema e morbida soavità, e colli bianchissimi ed eleganti da veneri greche, pendono sulle pareti gialle e polverose. — Qui ancora troviamo una fanciulla, ma non è più la popolana sopita nel meriggio del bosco. È signora: vestita di bianco, inginocchiata sui gradini dell'altare, la fronte sulla balaustrata, le mani strette convulsivamente una con l'altra nel fervore della preghiera.

Le pieghe morbide del suo lungo vestito dalle alte maniche alla Margherita di Valois, cadono al suolo con abbandono artistico da statua, e biancheggiano soavi nella penombra rossastra della lampada notturna.

Il volto pallido della fanciulla, i grandi occhi castanei e profondi esprimono una disperazione straziante, cresciuta dalla tetra melanconia del crepuscolo morente. Oh, qual grazia chiedono mai quegli occhi al santo miracoloso nascosto dietro la cortina di damasco come un re orientale? — Ecco, ella s'alza al fine, e uscita sulla spianata si ferma immobile davanti al parapetto che guarda nella valle.

Sul cielo tinto di croco e di smeraldo si elevano i monti neri e la luna spunta fra le loro creste frastagliate. La rena della grande spianata scintilla ai primi raggi della luna, e il villaggio si profila laggiù, fra le agavi grigie e i pioppi argentei della valle, mentre il santuario spicca sul cielo violaceo del nord, coi due grandi finestroni bizantini che paiono due strani occhi di bronzo smaltati al riflesso dell'oriente fatto splendido dall'alba della luna.

Dietro, le terre di mezzanotte, immense campagne opime, valli dirupate in cui ruggia il torrente, e montagne sulle cui cime domina la leggenda, si stendono vaghe e indistinte come un sogno, nella luce vaporosa dell'ultimo crepuscolo, e i forti borghi solitari riposano fra i lentischi cinerei

covered by a waxen, damask draping in azure moiré.

Superb black braids, all black, the tellers of tales and tragedies either dreadful or piteous—jewels of gold and of silver, stupendous wax limbs, hands of Christian virgins of a supreme and supple delicateness, and the extremely white and elegant necks of Greek Venuses, hang on the yellow dust-covered walls.

Here too, we find a girl, but she is no longer the country girl slumbering in the noontime in the woods. She is a lady: dressed in white, kneeling on the steps of the altar, her forehead leaning on the balustrade, her hands held together convulsively in the fervour of prayer.

The soft folds of her long gown, with its high, Margherita di Valois sleeves, fall to the ground with artistic, statue-like abandon, and they shimmer softly in the reddish shade of the nocturnal lamp.

The girl's pale face, her large and deep brown eyes express heart-wrenching desperation, amplified by the dark melancholy of the perishing twilight. Oh, what possible grace can those eyes be asking of that miraculous saint hidden behind the damask curtain like an oriental king? She gets up finally, and when in the open space, she stops, motionless in front of the parapet that looks out over the valley.

Against the saffron and emerald tinted sky, the mountains rise black and the moon appears from between their craggy crests. The sands on the vast plain shine in the first rays of the moon, and the village can be seen down below, among the grey agaves and the silver poplars of the valley, as the sanctuary stands outlined against the violet sky to the north, with its great Byzantine windows looking like two strange eyes of bronze glazed by the reflections of the east made resplendent by the dawn of the moon.

Behind, the mid night lands—immense fertile meadows, precipitous valleys in which the torrent roars, and mountains on whose crests legend reigns—stretch vague and indistinct like a dream, in the vaporous light of the last

della pianura o su i greppi neri delle rupi scoscese.

La fanciulla bianca guarda al nord, e grandi visioni misteriose, sogni arcani e profondi le attraversano gli occhi pensosi perduti nell'estrema lontananza; e il suo volto pallido, il suo vestito marmoreo paiono d'argento nella nivea luminosità della luna sempre più bianca e fulgida a misura che cade la notte.

V.

Nell'alta notte plenilunare tre cavalieri passano al galoppo attraverso il sentiero delle montagne rocciose. La canna dei loro fucili brilla alla luna, e i cavalli nitriscono nel profondo silenzio del paesaggio sublime.

Lontano, le nuvole salgono dal mare di madreperla sottilmente pennellato nell'estremo orizzonte, salgono lente sul cielo d'orpello del plenilunio, azzurre e diafane sul fondo bianco dell'infinito.

Sulle cime delle alte montagne rocciose la neve disegna un profilo iridato, fantasmagorie marmoree e miniature d'oro degne dei versi d'Heine, ma le querce annose fremono al vento di tramontana che susurra tette leggende e storie di sangue fischiando fra le gole dirupate e le grotte di granito. — Il sentiero asprissimo attraversa tortuoso le rupi immani e i macigni neri che assumono fantastiche forme di torri gotiche rovinata e di dolmen coperti d'edera e di rubi, reso più pericoloso e pittoresco dalla luce della notte. Sotto il bosco i raggi della luna piovono a fasci, come getti di diamanti, proiettando aurei arabeschi e damaschine orientali sulle felci bionde ondulate dal vento: attraverso le querce brune il cielo lunato ha un aspetto così incantato coi suoi gemmei splendori che richiama al pensiero i cieli impossibili delle novelle da fate; e i ciclamini, i verbaschi, l'usnea dei tronchi impregnano l'aria d'un acuto profumo da foresta tropicale. — Oltre i tre cavalieri che attraversano il sentiero, neri, muti, avvolti nei loro cappotti bruni dal cappuccio a punta, come cavalieri erranti da epopea medioevale, un piccolo mandriano

twilight, and the strong solitary hamlets rest among the ashy mastic trees of the plain or the black crags of the steep cliffs.

The white girl looks to the north, and great mysterious visions, arcane and profound dreams, flit across her pensive eyes which are lost in the extreme distance; and her pale face, her marble-white gown look like silver in the snowy luminosity of the ever whiter and effulgent moon as night falls.

V.

In the high, plenilunar night, three horsemen ride down a rocky mountain path. The barrel of their rifles shines in the moonlight, and the horses neigh in the profound silence of that sublime landscape.

In the distance, the clouds rise from the mother-of-pearl sea, finely outlined in the distant horizon; they rise slowly into the spangled moonlit sky, azure and diaphanous against the whiteness of the immensity.

Along the ridges of the tall, rocky mountains, the snow paints an iridescent profile, marbled phantasmagorias and golden miniatures worthy of the verses of Heine, but the ancient oaks tremble in the north wind, which whispers dark legends and tales of blood that whistle through the precipitous gullies and granite caves.

The extremely steep path twists through the colossal crags and the black boulders that assume fantastic outlines of Gothic towers in ruins and dolmen covered in vines and ivy, made more dangerous and picturesque by the light of the night. Below the woods, the rays of the moonlight rain down in bands, like sprays of diamonds, projecting golden arabesques and oriental damascening on the blond ferns, rippled by the wind: through the brown oaks, the moonlit sky looks so enchanted with its gem-like splendours that it calls to mind the impossible skies of fairy tales; and the cyclamens, the verbascum, the usnea on the trunks fill the air with an acute scent of tropical forest.

Besides the three horsemen, black, silent, swathed in their brown coats with



con la sua greggia popola ad un tratto la solitudine infinita delle montagne. Seduto sotto una rupe, insensibile al vento che fischia nel limpido plenilunio, guarda le pecore pascolanti nella notte chiara, intento al loro tintinnio monotono e melanconico vibrante fra i burroni erbosi e le pietre muscose, fra le eriche selvaggie e i tronchi divelti dalla procella.

Il piccolo mandriano è brutto, il volto oscuro come l'albagio del suo ferrajuolo, ma nei suoi occhi cuprei dal bianco azzurrino e l'iride piena di un languore profondo, splende un raggio pensoso che è tutta una rivelazione: forse il piccolo pastore è già poeta e nell'interno della sua mente vergine e selvaggia come le montagne rocciose su cui scorrono i suoi giorni deserti, gusta più che qualsiasi artista colto e fine la poesia ineffabile, piena di voluttà sovrumane e spirituali; del silenzio azzurro dell'alta notte plenilunare.

their pointed hoods, like errant horsemen out of the Middle Ages, a small shepherd with his flock suddenly occupies the infinite solitude of the mountains. Sitting under a cliff, insensitive to the wind that whistles in the limpid plenilune, he watches his flock graze in the clear night, attentive to their monotonous and melancholy chime which vibrates among the grassy bluffs and the mossy boulders, in the wild heather and the trunks uprooted by the storm.

The small shepherd is ugly, his face as dark as the cloth of his cloak, but in his copper-coloured eyes with their pale-blue whites and their irises full of profound languor, a pensive ray, itself a revelation, shines: perhaps the small shepherd is already a poet, and in his mind, which is as virgin and wild as the rocky mountains on which he spends his deserted days, he enjoys, more than any cultured and refined artist, the ineffable poetry full of superhuman and spiritual delight, of the azure silence of the dead of that plenilunar night.

## Two Stories by Cao Kou

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The author Cao Kou (born 1977) hails from a small river island in the central Chinese city of Nanjing, the former capital and still an important centre for literature and culture. Making his literary debut in 2001, he has since developed a broad readership and earned critical acclaim as a prolific author of fiction of all lengths, including a recent spate of flash fiction. Book-length renditions have appeared in French and Swedish, but translation into English has so far been limited to a few inclusions in translation sites such as Paper Republic and two anthologies.<sup>1</sup>

With his deadpan narrative voice and often cryptic endings, Cao Kou's stories present fragments and raking glances from unglamorous precincts of urban China. His protagonists, as in "Happy Childhood," are often first-person narrators from a hardscrabble middle class who contrast with both the miseries of rural poverty and the flashiness of cosmopolitan high-flyers one more commonly encounters in contemporary Chinese fiction. Instead, we get the usually quiet mass of ordinary urbanites, leading lives that are materially adequate and not notably inspired, romantic, moral, or political. Taken together, this provides anti-dramatic, deflationary account of contemporary urban China from an author (and characters) too young to have experienced the Cultural Revolution and still pre-pubescent in 1989. On the other hand, they are too old to be digital natives or glowing with the "Go Global" optimism of the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao years, with the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai Expo at the apex of international friendliness to an economically and politically rising China.

Cao Kou is part of a very conversational type of writing in Chinese fiction, one that arguably can be particularly associated with Nanjing writers (Twitchell and Huang, van Crevel 78). One effect of this chattiness is a pervasive use of paratactic phrases, where clauses are strung together without hierarchy as a series of comments. Chinese fiction generally allows looser syntax than more formal writing, but following this punctuation in translation creates features such as run-on sentences and comma splices. However, in order to maintain the tone, I have considered it preferable not to default entirely to conventional English grammar either, but to trust the reader—who, after all, may well also have dealt with Joyce or Woolf or Beckett—to follow the flow. Where outright ambiguity becomes a danger, however, I have attempted to insert a judicious full stop here and there.

Rachel May noted that leaders of literary fiction in English are used to the way that "[m]odernist fiction uses punctuation, along with such syntactic structures as conjunction and parataxis, in experimental ways, for visual effect or to highlight the interplay of textual voices" but that translators of author such as Woolf or Faulkner into French or Russian were liable to normalize the punctuation. The same is true of Chinese writers such as Cao Kou, whose pun too positions himself outside the literary mainstream, although he is resistant to labels such as avant-garde. But even if his writing is not self-consciously path-breaking, the gain in similarity of style and rhythm may outweigh the slightly more-than-equivalent increase in strangeness.

My attitude to this matter of punctuation has its foundation in an orientation toward the illusion of transparency, what Anthea Bell called "the illusion...that the reader is reading not a translation but the real thing" even as she acknowledged that it is "an impossible ideal to

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<sup>1</sup> An essay about Cao Kou and three translations of short stories (including two by the present translator), will be published in the upcoming double issue on Nanjing Literature and Arts of *Perspectives in the Arts and Humanities Asia*.

achieve” (59). This position was articulated in more critical terms by Jiri Levy as “Illusionist translators hide behind the original, as though they were presenting it to the reader directly rather than as intermediaries, in order to create a translation illusion based on a contract with the reader or the viewer” (19). On this commonsensical account, the reader of a piece of literary fiction in translation knows that what they are reading is translation just as they know it is fiction, and it is on acceptance of this contract that they undertake the reading. While also acknowledging that “all translations can be situated along the continuum of illusionist-anti-illusionist or domesticating-foreignizing” (Kellman 7) many translators and readers accept the compromise of illusionist translating even when aware of its artificiality.

“The Story of Peng Fei and Wang Aishu” (first published in the literary journal *Hibiscus* in 2014) and “Happy Childhood” (published in *Youth*, 2019) are fairly representative of Cao Kou’s recent urban stories.<sup>2</sup> The narrators’ outsider personas, the deliberate shifts of the narrator perspective, the resolute colloquialism and occasional vulgarity all present particular difficulties for the translator, but the most challenging aspect is to manage the tone—never quite leaving a world-weary, sardonic voice even when dealing with an unexpected death (in “The Story of Peng Fei and Wang Aishu”) or the legacy, two generations on, of Nanjing Massacre atrocities (in “Happy Childhood”). My strategy for these two stories has been to try to imagine them as something of a bar story (although a Cao Kou narrator is more likely at a drunken banquet), as both stories seem to be narrated by men no longer quite young recounting anecdotes from their past. To work toward the illusionist translation, this means veering away from pathos, rephrasing for the chattiest option (“he got paid better” rather than “he earned more”), but while also watching for the instances where contrasts in register (a sudden distancing, an abrupt formality) or non sequiturs produce their disconcertingly humorous effects.

Perhaps the most difficult single translation item came in “The Story of Peng Fei and Wang Aishu” where an unconsidered use of first-person pronoun causes offense and is the fulcrum of the story. The Chinese term is “*laozi*,” and means “father” (though literally it might be “old one” and when it can sometimes be appropriately translated as “old man”). Used in the first person, dictionaries variously note that it is colloquially “said in anger or in fun” and “used arrogantly or jocularly” –and the story turns on this ambiguity. Peng Fei, who has some kind of disability that impacts his mobility, is annoyed that his friend Wang Aishu has asked about his medical expenses, and responds “*Laozi* never gets sick.” Wang is from the urban periphery and poorer than Peng Fei. When Peng defends his body in a jocular fashion, Wang reads it in class terms as arrogance (“Are you my *laozi*?”). For this section, I finally settled on “Daddy” which, though a substantially stranger first-person usage than the Chinese, is both intelligible as jokiness and provides plausible grounds for offense, since “Who’s your Daddy?” is a phrase expressing dominance, sometimes also of a sexual nature (Farhi). That awkwardness, too, reads into the undercurrent of homophobic anxiety that runs through their homosocial interactions.

Vulgarity was also part of the equation in the opening of “Happy Childhood,” where the familiar trope of teacher-crush takes a rather scatological turn with an eye (or a nose) for the neutral male-chatty tone. While “arse” and “ass” situate the speaker uncomfortably on either side of the pond, “butt” seems to be both less regional and less rude—while the Chinese (“*pigu*”) is used for a broad range of registers but is itself as inoffensive as ‘behind’. (‘Behind’ was itself out since it does not come with cheeks and like ‘bum’ seems to be too deliberately safe for a speaker who has no trouble saying ‘shit’ –which needs to be contrasted with ‘crap’ later in the story when it becomes a fertiliser).

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<sup>2</sup> The stakes are different due to the inclusion of Xinjiang characters in one of Cao Kou’s other translated stories, “Headscarf Girl” (Cao Kou 2020) but the protagonist’s tone and social position are very similar.

As always with translation, cultural differences are a concern. Thus, although Chinese gravestones do not say “Rest in Peace” or anything like it, to make legible the joke surrounding the macabre proposed name for their Arbor Day tree, I found it necessary to undertake this substitution. Similarly, a reference to the iconic Lei Feng has been prefaced with “worker hero.” Other cultural references seemed comprehensible enough from context without further explanation. But other resonances are unrecoverable: while the PRC reader of Cao’s generation will recognize a certain theme song as marking the influx of Hong Kong culture of the 1980s, no amount of translation legerdemain can convey this information. Similarly, QQ chatting dates the beginning of “The Story of Peng Fei and Wang Aishu” to the early years of the millennium in a way that AOL Instant Messenger might for North American users, but such a substitution was avoided for fear of provoking a series of inapposite associations with the reader. And one element, the textbook child heroes from the Sino-Japanese war who feature in the textbooks of “Happy Childhood” combined the challenges of contextual complexity with that of offensive language. On the one hand, the vignette highlights the decline from the solemnity of the high Maoism to the mid-Deng era, by which time some of the propagandistic cultural excess was becoming risible. And on the other, it contains the most common term for the Japanese, certainly in Nanjing, with its grim wartime history. In the original draft I translated *guizi*, literally “demons,” simply as “the Japanese.” But *guizi* is of course hopelessly rude, and, called out by one of the peer reviewers, in the end there is little choice but to translate Sino-phonetic slur with Anglo-phonetic slur.

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Translated by Josh Stenberg

那个叫史珍香的女的自从当了我们的班主任后，就没有同学觉得她长得好看了。

在之前，也就是她教我们音乐课的时候，那可真漂亮。两条大辫子别人都任它在后面拖着。她不，总是要拿到前面来，一左一右搭在奶子上。而且她还喜欢玩弄自己的辫梢，这样一来，辫子就在乳房上走了个曲线。王勇说，她的乳房起码有我吃饭的大碗那么大，倒扣着。说着他在自己干瘪的胸前还比划了比划。我说，是，我知道你一顿吃两碗。有时候她的辫子也会跑到后面去。比如她垫着脚在黑板上方写字的时候，我们除了看到她的腰（腰眼还有两个酒窝那样的小肉坑），就是能看到那两根辫子一左一右指着她的两瓣屁股。但这两瓣屁股是臭的。上音乐课，脚踏琴和琴凳需要上课班级的相关同学搬来搬去。负责搬琴凳的王勇曾在下课后对着琴凳的皮革垫子上屁股的形状爱护不已，他知道，随着时间的流逝，皮革下面的海绵会恢复到原来的样子，这两瓣屁股形状的痕迹在他将凳子搬出门外就会消失。世界上比它短暂的生命大概没有。所以王勇曾经将凳子高高举起，由胸口抬至鼻尖，并以比这个短暂的生命更加短暂的方式嗅了嗅前者。很臭，王勇说，是那种新鲜的尿臭。就算如此，我们仍然觉得音乐老师史珍香是那么漂亮，或者更加漂亮。

After the woman called Shi Zhenxiang became our classroom teacher, no one thought she was good-looking anymore.

Which is to say, before that, when she was just our music teacher, she really had been beautiful. Her two braids—on other girls they would always dangle down the back. But not on her, she always had them down the front, one to the left, one to the right, over the breasts. And she liked to fiddle with the ends of the braids, which in good time would shape the braids to curve around the breasts. Wang Yong said, her breasts are at least as big as those big rice bowls I eat out of, if you turned them upside down. And as he said that he gestured to his bony chest. I said, sure, plus you eat two bowls every meal. Other times the braids would end up behind her. Like when she was writing on the blackboard, besides gazing at her back (she had two little hollows in her back, like dimples) we gazed at the ends of her two braids, one left and one right, outlining her two buttocks. But the two buttocks reeked. When we had music class, it was the students' job to bring in the pedal piano and the piano stool. Wang Yong, who was in charge of the piano stool, was enraptured by the form that the buttocks left on the stool's leather covering after class. He knew that after a time, the sponge beneath the leather would resume its original shape, and the marks of the two buttocks would disappear by the time he had carried the stool out of the room. I guess nothing on this earth ever lived so briefly. That's why Wang Yong on one occasion lifted the stool so that he held it from his chest to the tip of his nose, a sniff even briefer than the indent's brevity. It stinks, Wang Yong said, that fresh scent of shit. But we thought that the music teacher Shi Zhenxiang was so beautiful anyway, maybe we even thought she was more beautiful because of it.

As classroom teacher, Shi Zhenxiang was a big pain. She was relentless, ordering

班主任史珍香就很讨厌了。她无休止地命令我们干这个干那个，一旦没有按照她的要求做好，她就会实施惩罚。王勇写错了一个字，她问他为什么写错，他说是粗心大意，没看清。她就拽他的眼皮，差点让他的眼球夺眶而出。夺眶而出的是眼泪。她反问，难道你还委屈？王勇哭着指了指我，告诉她，我是抄他的！于是她又叫我和王勇将手摊放在讲台上，用那根教鞭打。这是一根柳条教鞭，还是王勇亲自制作的。春天刚刚到来的时候，他邀请我和他一起来到河边，然后三下两下蹿上树，经过一番筛选，他选择了这根笔直而粗细适当的。为了使柳条切口规整，他没有采取蛮力将它折下，而是从口袋里取出削铅笔的小刀慢慢切割。为了使我们的教鞭区别于其他班级的，他还用那把小刀在上面镌刻了花纹，即保留一厘米的树皮，之后的下一厘米，他又环形切掉树皮，如此白色（树干）和绿色（树皮）交错，迭加往复，让人眼花缭乱。现在，那些环形树皮不少已经被史珍香的指甲抠了下来，没抠下来的已经发黑了。

我们站在教室外面的屋檐下回忆往事，心里很不是滋味。身后是史珍香在训斥其他某个同学的声音，眼前则是空无一人的校园。教师办公室方向偶尔有人站在门口冲外面倒茶杯，他们换茶叶总是很勤快，我们每天都要踩到他们的茶叶。一年级方向的小弟弟小妹妹们正在参差不齐地读拼音字母。当然，我们也承认，从一年级一直带我们的班主任张龟雄跟史珍香

us to do this or that, and if you didn't follow her orders to the letter, you got punished. Wang Yong wrote one character wrong, and when she asked him why he had done that, he said that he had been careless, he hadn't gotten a good look. So she yanked him by the eyelid, almost making his eyeball pop out of its socket. Instead, what came out were tears. So she asked him, you think you're getting a hard deal? Wang Yong cried and, pointing at me, said, I was copying off him! And so she made me and Wang Yong place our hands on the lectern and then she struck us with the teacher's pointer. It was a willow pointer; Wang Yong had actually made it himself. Right at the beginning of spring, he had taken me down to the riverside with him, and, scrambling up the tree, he picked this willow shoot—straight and thick as it ought to be. To get a clean break, he didn't snap it off with brute force, he cut it off with a little blade that we used to sharpen pencils and that he kept in his pocket. So that our pointer would be different from other classes' pointers, he even carved a little pattern into it, and left a centimetre of bark on it, and after that he had cut a ring in the bark, so that the white (the flesh of the tree) and the green (the bark) crisscrossed and intersected...it was enough to make your vision blur. By now, many of those rings in the bark had been scraped off by Shi Zhenxiang's nails, and what she hadn't scraped off had already gone black.

We stood under the eaves outside the classroom reminiscing about the past, a bad taste in our mouths. Behind us was the sound of Shi Zhenxiang tearing a strip off some other classmate, and in front of us were the school premises, deserted. Outside the staff room, there would occasionally be someone tipping the used leaves out of their cups—when it came to refreshing their tea they were very efficient—and so we had to walk through their tealeaves every day. The little boys and girls of Grade One were spelling out the phonetic alphabet in an unholy jumble. Of course, we had to admit that our classroom teacher, Zhang Guixiong, who had been with us since Year One, was much the same as Shi Zhenxiang, with the only

也差不多，唯一的区别是他不会揪眼皮和打手心，而只惯于罚跪和大凿毛栗。但想到他现在躺在医院里，我们感到十分难过。我们曾在史珍香的带领下去过医院看望我们的前班主任，看到他直挺挺地躺在雪白的床单上被同样雪白的被子盖着，让我们觉得他还置身于白雪皑皑的严冬。我们分别在他面前汇报了我们的学习情况，并且还唱了一首史珍香事先教会我们的《路过老师的窗前》。张龟雄感激地闭上了眼睛。我们给亲爱的张老师带来的老母鸡和鸡蛋，希望他能尽快恢复。与此同时，我们又兴高采烈地欢迎史珍香担任我们新的班主任，王勇并就此特意制作了一根新教鞭。现在，我们还没来得及悔恨，而只是沉浸在对张龟雄的怀念之中。

你说，王勇问，张龟雄现在到底死没死？

我说，我们这么怀念他，他肯定会死的。

植树节那天，我们要栽树。沿着围墙，两人负责栽一棵。是水杉。我和王勇当然是一组。

在史珍香指定的地面上，我们开始挖洞。在就先往洞里浇水还是先把树栽好再浇水这个问题上，我和王勇发生了争执。王勇持前一观点，我持后论。唇枪舌剑，以至于在想象中动起了手。我们分别操持着各自的铁锹向对方头上拍去，我一锹下去，王勇脑浆四溅，流得他满身都是。尤其是白色的脑浆流在红领巾上相当扎眼。不过，他没有对此表示介意，而是强调他的衣服是他妈妈昨天刚洗的，到现在还有

difference that he didn't yank you by the eyelid or strike you on the palm, instead preferring to mete out kneeling and rapping you on the head with his knuckles. But when we thought of him as he was now, bedridden in hospital, we felt very sorry for him. Shi Zhenxiang had taken us once to the hospital to visit him, and when we saw him lying straight on the snow-white bedsheets, covered in blankets that were equally snow-white, it had felt to us like he had gotten trapped in some pure but bitter winter. We each reported to him how our studies were progressing, and even sang a song that Shi Zhenxiang had taught us, "Passing by Our Teacher's Window." Zhang Guixiong gratefully closed his eyes. We gave our dear Teacher Zhang an old soup chicken and some eggs, hoping for his quick recovery. At the same time, we jubilantly welcomed Shi Zhenxiang as our new head teacher, and that's when Wang Yong made the new pointer especially for her. And before we could even get around to to regret giving it to her we were steeped in longing for Zhang Guixiong.

Say, Wang Yong asked me, did Zhang Guixiong die after all that?

I said, if we miss him so much, then he's dead for sure.

On Arbor Day, we had to plant trees. Two students per sapling, along the outer wall. Dawn redwoods. Naturally, Wang Yong and I were paired together.

In the spot Shi Zhenxiang indicated, we started to dig a hole. Wang Yong and I had a dispute over whether to dig the hole first or water the ground first. Wang Yong insisted on the former procedure, I on the latter. The difference of opinion became so animated that in my imagination we started to grapple. We each took our shovels and brought them down on one another's heads, and as soon as I struck down, Wang Yong's brains splattered all over him. The white brain matter splattering over the red kerchief was particularly eye-catching. However, he didn't seem to mind this, emphasizing instead that his mother had only yesterday

肥皂的味道。他能够容忍脑浆流到任何地方，但绝不容忍脑浆弄脏了他妈妈新洗的衣服。所以他哭喊着一锹拍在我的脸上，将我的脸整个拍成锹背的模样。不知道为什么，我能够看到自己的脸，居然和史珍香留在琴凳上的屁股痕迹一模一样。因此，我还用已经陷入脸膛内部找不到的鼻子认真嗅了嗅，确实也有一股屎臭。

后来，我们只好采取了一个折中办法。不浇水，但王勇用他的铁锹到厕所里挖一锹大粪过来预先放入坑中，再按我的方法，将树苗放进坑中，填土浇水。好，很好，大粪会给我们的小树苗提供多于旁人的营养，这是科学，我没有任何理由反对。然后他就这么干了。那是一锹相当浓厚的粪便，五颜六色而又整体发黑。而且它没有我们想象的那么臭。当王勇将粪便倒入坑中之后，我不禁出于好奇弯下腰来仔细看看。除了干硬的屎橛子和各色稀屎，最吸引我目光的是一些擦屁股的纸张，作业纸上的红叉红勾清晰可见（学生用），报纸上的国家领导人也笑若桃花（教师用）。此外还有一只鞋子。看尺码，顶多是一年级学生穿的。王勇觉得这只鞋对树苗来说没有任何营养，就将它挑了出来，然后去寻找失主。当然，这是之后。我们还是得先把树栽好。

根据史珍香事先的宣布，每棵树都由栽他们的人命名，并书写一块纸牌挂在上面，用以标记。我们看了看别人的名字，有叫“苗苗”的，也有叫“壮壮”的，此类最多。还有个叫

washed his clothes, and that they still smelled of soap. He didn't mind where the brain matter went, but not if it was going to get on the clothes his mom had just washed. And so with a shriek he slammed the shovel down into my face, so that my face looked just like the back of a shovel. I don't know why I could see my own face, but it looked just like the imprint that Shi Zhenxiang had left on the piano stool. And so I held the stool assiduously under my nose, now situated somewhere deep inside by face, and lo and behold there was a whiff of shit.

Later, we had no choice but to compromise. We didn't water the soil, but Wang Yong brought a shovelful of crap over from the outhouse and dumped it in the hole, and then, as I had advocated, we put the sapling into the hole, filled it in with soil and watered it. Nice, very nice, the crap would offer our sapling more nutrition than other students' saplings, and that was science, I had no grounds for opposition. And so that's what he did. It was quite a thick shovelful of crap, with a contribution from every colour of the rainbow albeit blackish on the whole. Moreover, it wasn't as stinky as we had supposed. After Wang Yong dumped the crap into the hole, I couldn't stop myself from bending over out of curiosity to have a good look. Besides the little clumps of dry shit and the thin multicoloured shit, the part that most caught my eye was a piece of paper that had been used as toilet paper but on which the red exes and ticks of homework could be clearly seen (paper for student use) and the faces of the country's leaders, wreathed in smiles (paper for instructor use). Besides that there was a shoe. Judging by its size, it couldn't belong to any kid older than Year One. Wang Yong felt that the shoe would offer the sapling no nutrition at all, and plucked it out to go look for its owner. Of course, that happened afterwards. First we had to plant the tree properly.

According to Shi Zhenxiang's previous announcement, every tree was to be named by the pair that had planted it, and the instructions were to hang a cardboard sign on the sapling, bearing the name it had been



“我的中国心”的，算是较有创意。但这都不能让我们赞赏。

一定要起个牛逼的名字！我说。

大概是王勇家里死的人比较多经常上坟的缘故吧，王勇说，要不叫“王曹氏”吧，一看就我俩栽的。

我说，那为什么不叫“曹王氏”呢，还是一看就我俩栽的。

争执这个没意思，而且站着想名字让我们感到十分劳累。所以我们来到水泥乒乓球台上。为了免于受到对方的干扰，我们以砖砌的中网为界，各自坐一边思索。校园里到处都是追追打打的同学，据说他们正在欢度幸福的童年，而我和王勇却必须从幸福童年中抽出空来为一棵树想名字，这可真够我们受的。

何不就叫“幸福的童年”？我和王勇几乎异口同声说。

我们为那只小鞋子寻找失主找了整整一个春天。不过，我们没有主动去问别人有没有丢鞋子，而只是盯着别人的脚看。我们希望在晨会的操场上发现有一个家伙只穿了一只鞋子。功夫不负有心人，后来我们终于发现广播站的陶老师只穿了一只鞋。话说这个陶老师，中年，秃顶，胳膊窝里拄着根拐杖。听说他早年在采石场工作，负责点炸药。有一天，他把自己齐胯炸断了一条腿。成为残疾人后，他来到了我们学校，主要在校内负责看大门和广播站工作，播放运动员进行曲和喊口令，偶尔也使用当地话代读学生撰写班主任润色的国旗下的

given. We looked at the names the other kids had used, some were called “Sprouty” and others “Hardy,” lots of names like that. There was also one called “My Chinese Heart,” which I suppose was innovative. But none of them inspired my admiration.

We need to give it a killer name! I said.

I guess because he was related to more dead people and often went to their graves, Wang Yong said, let’s call it “RIP Wang and Cao,” then everyone will see right away that we planted it.

I said, why wouldn’t it be called “RIP Cao and Wang” then, people would still see right away that we planted it.

It would have been dull to argue about it, and it was exhausting to stand about trying to think of a name. So we went down to the cement ping-pong table.

To avoid interference, we separated ourselves by the row of bricks that formed the ping-pong net and each sat on his own side to think. The campus was full of our classmates chasing each other down and beating each other up, allegedly enjoying their happy childhood years, while Wang Yong and I had to take time out of our happy childhoods to make up names for a tree, it was really a big ask.

So why don’t we call it “Happy Childhood?” Wang Yong and I said, almost simultaneously.

We spent a whole spring looking for the kid who had lost that little shoe. However, we didn’t proactively ask people if they had lost a shoe; instead, we just stared at people’s feet. We hoped to find someone wearing only one shoe at morning call at the sportsgrounds. Hard work pays off, because we discovered that Teacher Tao, who ran the public address system, only had one shoe on. By the way, this Teacher Tao was bald and middle-aged, with a crutch under his arm. They said as a youngster he’d worked in the stone quarry, doing the explosives. One day he blew his own leg off. Crippled, he came to work at the school. Mostly he acted as gatekeeper and ran the public address system, broadcasting marches and

讲话稿。在周末，如果我们想进学校遭到他的拒绝后，我们还可以翻围墙。总之，因为他是个瘸子，而且从来没有在我们的课堂上出现过，而且亲友死绝，至今未婚，以校为家，所以大家十分爱戴他。我们甚至想，等我们长大了，一定会非常想念陶老师的。

于是课后我们来到了广播站。

广播站里除了桌椅、唱机、话筒、锦旗，还有一些靠墙摆放的旗帜。旗帜掩映之下还有一面鼓和两个黄灿灿的铙钹。哦，这些玩意儿是在节日使用的，这不由地使我们想起六一儿童节时的场面。

陶老师，我们只看到你穿一只鞋子，请问，这只鞋子是不是您另一条腿的？王勇开门见山地说。

陶老师接过那只鞋子，翻来覆去甚至还掀开鞋舌看了看内部，然后很确定地告诉我们，不是，我没有这样的鞋子。

我说，假如是您的，请您千万别客气。

真的不是我的，陶老师语气诚恳，说着还拿着那只鞋放在本来属于他那只丢在采石场的脚的位置，并晃动那只健在的大脚说，你们觉得这可能吗？

其实在我们看来，如果不把一大一小看作问题的话，确实算一双。

王勇觉得不能就此放弃，说，陶老师，也有可能是您小时候丢掉的鞋子，您说是吗？

陶老师露出慈爱的神情，带领我们一起追忆了自己的童年。他说他小时候确实经常丢东

commands, and occasionally reading out student texts in dialect, polished by the classroom teachers, about life under the national flag. On weekends, if we wanted to come into campus but he hadn't let us in, we could jump over the wall anyway. On the whole, since he was crippled, and because he had never appeared in the classrooms, and because he seemed to have no friends or family, and had never married, and lived in the school, everybody really loved him. We even thought about how, when we grew old, we would all really miss Teacher Tao.

That's why, after class, we went to the PA office.

In the PA office, besides chairs and tables, a record player, microphones, and embroidered pennants, there were also some flags hung against the wall. Half-hidden by the flags was a drum as well as shiny golden cymbals. Ah, these were things for use on holidays, which made us naturally think of the Children's Day shows on June 1st.

Teacher Tao, we saw that you were only wearing one shoe, can we ask does this shoe belong to the other foot? Wang Yong said without preamble.

Teacher Tao took the shoe, turning it every which way and even flipping up the tongue to look inside, and then said with great certainty, no, I don't have a shoe like that.

I said, if it *is* yours, there's no need to be polite.

It really isn't mine, Teacher Tao said earnestly, and even placed the shoe in the place where the foot he lost in the quarry would have been, and swung the remaining stump of his limb, did you really think it might be?

Actually we had thought, apart from the size, they really might make a pair.

Wang Yong thought that we shouldn't give up so easily, saying, Teacher Tao, maybe it was a shoe that you lost when you were a kid, right?

A compassionate smile on his features, Teacher Tao guided us into the days of his childhood. He said that he really was always losing things when he was a kid, and among

西，也确实丢过一只鞋。那年头日本人经常强奸我国妇女，国民党则在一旁推开半个门缝偷看。那时候的陶老师并非妇女，只是一个四五岁的小男孩，但不知为什么，也跟这一大群妇女一个劲地逃跑。在逃跑的途中，那条后来炸断的腿所属的鞋确实跑丢了。

这个故事让我们心中生起无限的同情。我说，也许您当年没有丢掉那只鞋，腿就不会后来被炸断，您觉得是这样吗？

是这样，我亲爱的孩子们。陶老师点头同意。

在我们把那只找不到失主的小鞋子重新扔进粪坑的时候，六一儿童节就到了。

史珍香要求我们班无论男女，所有同学都穿白衬衫黑裤子，并且还要求我们问父母要了两毛钱集体买一条新的红领巾。当天早晨，她还叫我们提前一个小时到校，由她给我们每个人化个妆。我看到王勇一改往日的形象，浓眉大眼，两颊红扑扑的，像课本插图里那个送鸡毛信的家伙，他则认为我更像那个把鬼子带进八路军包围圈的少年。

我们收到了礼物，和往年一样，是一支铅笔一块橡皮和两个硬水果糖。也和往年一样，先是在操场上红旗招展鼓乐喧天地绕着跑道游行，然后就是进入指定的方阵，在草地上坐下，听村长和校长的祝辞，之后才是最受期待的文艺表演。每年此时，校外田野里干活的农民，服装厂里的女工，都会跑来观看。因为这

them had indeed been a shoe. At the time, the Japanese had often raped Chinese women, while the Nationalists were holding the door open a crack, to peek in. Teacher Tao had not at that time been a woman, actually he was only a little boy of four or five, but—and he didn't know why—he too had fled with that pack of women. As they fled, the shoe of the foot that would later be blown off had indeed been lost.

The story filled us with boundless sympathy. I said, if you hadn't lost that shoe back in the day, maybe the leg wouldn't have been blown off? Do you think that's right?

That's right, dear children, Teacher Tao agreed, nodding.

We threw the shoe, whose owner could not be found, back into the outhouse pit just as June 1<sup>st</sup> arrived: Children's Day.

Shi Zhenxiang asked all the pupils in the class, both boys and girls, to wear white shirts and black pants, and also to ask our parents to bring twenty cents each for a new red kerchief. That morning, we were furthermore requested to arrive at school an hour early, so that she could put make-up on all of us. Now that Wang Yong had changed his usual appearance and had heavy eyebrows and great big eyes as well as scarlet cheeks, he looked to me just like the kid in the textbook illustration who heroically delivers the letter across enemy lines while he thought I looked like the youth who leads the Japs into the Eighth Army trap.

We got presents, the same as every year: a pencil, an eraser and two hard fruit bonbons. Also like every year, first the red flag was raised at the sports ground before we paraded around the track to deafening drums and music. Then we entered our assigned formations and sat down on the grass to hear the town mayor and the principal's congratulatory addresses, and only after that would there be the cultural shows that we were waiting for. Every year at that point the farmers working the land outside the school and the women workers in their factory uniforms would all run over to watch us. And given that these farmers and factory workers

些农民和女工都是我们的家长，所以我们表演起来更加卖力。

对于我和王勇来说，这是我们最后一个儿童节。所以我们决定表演一番武术对打。

在《霍元甲》主题曲的伴奏下，我和王勇跳入场地，不由分说，就打了起来。我一拳打在王勇的脸上，他的一颗牙立即就飞了出来。他则一脚踢到我的裆，我疼得意识到就算长大了也别想娶到老婆。所以我只好找了块砖头拍在他的大脑门上，血立即盖住了他的脸。他看不见，像一个太极拳高手那样在四下里东摸西摸，好不容易摸到一个坐在前排的一年级的弟弟，将他拉起来，并将他举起来向我砸来。我躲开了，那个小孩一头栽在了地上……

操你妈，打死你。我说。

操你妈，打不死你。王勇说。

我们的表演获得了雷鸣般的掌声。

因为伤势过重，我俩分别被送到了医院。在医院，我们获知，我们的前班主任张龟雄确实已经死了。而因为今天是六一儿童节，各小学都有伤员，所以病床紧缺，我和王勇睡在一张床上。兴许就是张龟雄死的那张床，只是因为医院里万物皆白，我们像在雪地里一样迷失了方向，并晕眩不已，很快就睡着了。

等我们醒来，傍晚的骄阳自窗口而入，给病房里抹了一层尿色。这让我们感到舒服多了。

我做了一个梦。王勇说。

我也做了个。我说。

were our parents, we put every effort into our performances.

For me and Wang Yong this was our last Children's Day. So we decided to perform a martial arts battle.

To the strains of *The Legendary Fok* theme song, Wang Yong and I leapt into the performance space, and without any explanation began to fight. I landed a punch on his face and one of his teeth immediately flew off. But he kicked me in the groin and the impact made me feel that even when I was of age I could forget about getting married. So I had no choice but to find a brick to tap him on the head with, covering his face in blood. This blinded him, and he groped about in all directions like a tai chi master, finally grabbing a little first grade boy sitting in the first row. He pulled him to his feet, then lifted him to land me a crushing head blow. I evaded him and the little boy landed head-first on the ground.

Motherfucker, I'm going to kill you, I said.

Motherfucker, not if I kill you first, Wang Yong said.

Our performance was greeted with thunderous applause.

Due to the severity of our injuries, we were each separately sent to the hospital. At the hospital we learnt that our former classroom teacher Zhang Guixiong had already died. Also, because today was Children's Day, there were casualties from all the primary schools and there were few beds available so Wang Yong and I had to sleep in the same bed. Perhaps it was the same bed Zhang Guixiong had died on. Because everything in the hospital was white, we were like people who had lost their way in the snow and, struck down by dizziness, we rapidly fell asleep.

When we awoke, the blazing sun was coming in through the window and shedding a shit-coloured sheen over the whole sickroom. We felt much more comfortable.

I had a dream, Wang Yong said.

So did I, I said.

那我先说，王勇说，我梦见广播站了，陶老师正在和史珍香干坏事，史珍香的奶子和屁股我都看到了。

陶老师呢？我问。

他当然也脱光了，但我觉得他还是有两条腿，那条炸断的腿又长出了一个新芽，一个非常小的新腿，只长到那条好腿的膝盖部位。也有脚，很小，穿的就是我们在厕所搞到的那只鞋。

真有意思啊你这个梦。我由衷地赞叹了一番。

你呢，你那个梦？

我说，我这个梦没你的好，显得很无聊。

怎么说？

我梦见自己长大了，回到了母校。但我们的学校已经跟其他学校合并了，这里已经没有人了。黑板上彩色粉笔画的学习园地还在，你用白色粉笔在黑板上画的雷锋也在，包括卫生角的秃头扫帚和流动红旗都在，但没有风，所有东西都一动不动。

树呢？我们的幸福的童年呢？

没看到，没有，没了。我说。

### 彭飞和王爱书的故事

你应该还记得王爱书和彭飞初次见面的情况。

Me first, Wang Yong said. I dreamt of the PA office, Teacher Tao and Shi Zhenxiang were doing the dirty, and I saw her boobies and her butt.

What about Teacher Tao? I asked.

Of course he was naked too, but I think he still had both his legs, the one that got blown off had grown back, a very small new leg, it had grown back up but only reached the knee on his good leg. There was a foot on it too, very small, and on it was that shoe we got from the outhouse.

That's a great dream. I gave a sigh of genuine admiration.

And you, what about your dream?

I said, my dream's not as good as yours, it'll be boring.

How come?

I dreamt that I had grown up and was going back to school as an alum. But our school had merged with other schools, and there was nobody here anymore. The map of the study area in coloured chalk on the blackboard—that was still there—and the picture you drew of worker hero Lei Feng in white was there too, and even the hairless mops in the hygiene corner and the red pennants—they were all there, but there was no wind, so nothing was moving.

And the tree? Our Happy Childhood?

I didn't see it. No. No. I said.

### The Story of Peng Fei and Wang Aishu

You probably remember how it was when Peng Fei and Wang Aishu met for the first time.

Wang Aishu said, you have a limp, you really are a cripple.

王爱书说,你走路一瘸一拐的,不愧是个瘸子。

鹏飞说,是,这我难道没在 QQ 里跟你说过吗?

说过,但还是出乎我的意料。

正常,不止你一个人这么说。

然后他们就去吃饭了。按理说初次见面的人,他们应该喝点酒,但他们都表示自己滴酒不沾,所以互相谦让着——

你吃吃这个仔公鸡烧毛豆,毛豆还可以,鸡好像不行。

是吧。我觉得回锅肉还好,这最后一块你不吃我可就吃了。

……

就这些。和在 QQ 上相比,他们聊兴略小点。就算聊过什么,相信你也不记得了。

之后就是二人长达多年的交往。因为有了这个开头,所以在这些年里,他们的交往主要就是吃饭。点几个菜,叫一大碗饭分在各自的小碗里,然后嗯嗯往嘴里扒。天气热,吃得少,天一冷,还会添饭。理论上二人轮流买单,坚决不搞 AA 制,但大多数是鹏飞买单,因为据王爱书说,他家比较偏,不像鹏飞家在市中心,好找。而鹏飞则是个瘸子,无需劳动他到自己家去,所以都是王

Peng Fei said, yeah, didn't I tell you that when we were chatting on QQ?

You did, but it's worse than I thought.

You're not the only one who's mentioned it.

And then they went out to eat. In theory people meeting for the first time should have something to drink, but both of them said that they didn't touch the stuff, they kept politely refusing—

Try this, fresh soybeans with chicken, the beans are OK, but the chicken seems to be no good.

Guess not. The twice-cooked pork's not bad, I'll finish it if you don't want this last piece.

……

That's all. They were a bit less animated than in their QQ chats. So what if they chatted, I bet you don't remember what about, either.

After that they saw each other for years. Just because it was the way they had first met up, in those years they mostly went out to eat. They ordered a few dishes, a big rice bowl which they split between their two little bowls and then, grunting, shovelled into their mouths. When the weather was hot, they didn't eat as much, and when it was cold, they ordered an extra bowl of rice. In theory they took turns getting the bill, never splitting it, but most of the time Peng Fei got it, because, by Wang Aishu's own account, he lived in the boonies, not like Peng Fei who lived downtown, and for whom it was no trouble to get to the restaurants. Plus Peng Fei was a cripple, it didn't make sense to make him go all the way out to where Wang lived, so it was always Wang Aishu who picked him up at home, and then at the restaurant Peng Fei was host. Another thing: Peng Fei had once let slip the fact that he got paid more than Wang Aishu.

Soon they had eaten at every place near Peng Fei's home. In the end they had to come

爱书登门拜访,鹏飞须尽地主之谊。而且鹏飞曾不慎泄露了自己收入比王爱书高的事实。

鹏飞家附近的馆子很快就被他们吃遍了。最后二人得出结论,那个名叫“湘琴酒家”的最好。

吃了二三十顿后,有一天在湘琴酒家,王爱书发现鹏飞面对回锅肉一副毫无食欲的模样,就问他怎么了。鹏飞表示吃不下去。

为什么,这不是你最爱吃的东西吗?王爱书说着趁机往自己嘴里塞了块回锅肉。

鹏飞摇头不语。

病了吗?你不是有公费医疗嘛。王爱书又干了一块回锅肉。

因为腿脚不方便,鹏飞不愿意生病,所以反感别人这么说。他有点气急败坏地说,老子从来不生病。

王爱书也不高兴了,放下筷子责问对方,老子,什么老子,你是我老子吗?

不是那个意思,鹏飞露出了烦恼和疲惫的样子说,我觉得我们这样是不对的。

你是说没有女人的缘故?

这当然是一个问题,不过.....算了,吃饭吧。

王爱书是一个聪明人,当然不会勉强鹏飞说他不想说或不急于说的话。

to a conclusion, which was that Xiangqin Inn—‘Zither of Hunan’— was the best of the lot.

Once, after they had eaten there twenty or thirty times, Wang Aishu discovered that Peng Fei’s gaze was fixed on the twice-cooked pork with an expression totally devoid of appetite, and asked him what was up. Peng Fei indicated that he couldn’t finish it.

Why, isn’t this your favourite? Wang Aishu said, taking the opportunity to stuff some of the pork into his mouth.

Peng Fei shook his head and said nothing.

Are you sick? The state covers your treatment, right? Wang Aishu polished off another chunk of twice-cooked pork.

Because he couldn’t get around easily, Peng Fei hated getting sick, so he also hated it when people talked about it. An edge in his voice, he said, Daddy doesn’t get sick.

This annoyed Wang Aishu too, and he put down his chopsticks to question him. Daddy, where did that come from, are you my Daddy?

That’s not what I mean, Peng Fei said, looking irritated and tired. I think what we’re doing isn’t right.

You mean because there aren’t any girls?

That’s one problem of course, but...never mind, let’s just eat.

Wang Aishu was a clever guy, so of course he wasn’t going to pester Peng Fei to say what he didn’t want to or wasn’t in any hurry to say.

Having watched in admiration as Peng Fei stuffed himself with several mouthfuls of rice, Wang Aishu picked a sliver of meat about the size of a fingernail cutting from his teeth, and felt much more at ease. He said, why do you eat like you’re taking a crap?

Hungh?

欣赏着彭飞“嗯嗯”吃了几口饭后,王爱书剔出了牙缝中一块指甲盖大小的肉,感觉轻松多了。说,为什么你吃饭的声音和拉屎一样?

嗯?

嗯。嗯嗯嗯,难道你拉屎的时候嘴里不也发出这种声音?

你知道的,之后发生了一场血腥的恶斗,王爱书被彭飞一个酒瓶拍碎了脑袋,血流如注。彭飞则被王爱书一个扫堂腿掀翻在地。为什么呢?因为彭飞那只好腿也被扫骨折了。好在并无大碍,在家躺了一个多月,又继续瘸着原先的腿出门了。

在拉黑对方 QQ 绝交的这些年里,二人分别走上了人生的正轨,都成了有家室的人。王爱书工作不稳定,还住在城郊结合部,所以刚开始姑娘们总是很嫌弃,直到他老婆出现的时候才发生了转机。彭飞虽然有享受公费医疗的事业单位,而且住在市中心,但是个瘸子,所以找老婆也费了不少周折。总之,从第三者的角度来看,二人差不多是同时结婚的,一年之后也几乎同时当了爸爸,只是因为绝交,二人彼此不知而已。

不仅如此,婚姻还给他们的事业带来了帮助。王爱书的老婆家里有一门好亲戚,是做瓷砖生意的,而且生意很大,王爱书也便成了那家店

Hungh. Hungh hungh hungh, it's how you grunt when you're having a crap, too, right?

As you know, this ended in a bloody brawl. Wang Aishu got his head split open by the liquor bottle Peng Fei smashed on him, and he bled like a fountain. Peng Fei was felled by Wang Aishu's sweeping kick and rolled on the ground. And why? Because Peng Fei's good leg had a fracture from the fall. The good thing was that nothing too serious resulted, he rested up at home for a little for over a month, and then he could go about, limping on his good leg as before.

In the years when they had blocked each other's QQ accounts and stopped seeing each other, the two of them each continued along the straight and narrow path of human life, both becoming husbands and fathers. Wang Aishu didn't have stable work, and he still lived on the edge of the city, so at the beginning girls would always look down on him, a fact which didn't change until his wife made her appearance. Although Peng Fei worked in a state enterprise and the state paid for his treatment, and although he also lived downtown, on account of his being a cripple it took a lot of trials and tribulations before he got a wife. In any event, an outsider would have said that the two of them had gotten married at about the same time and after a year had become fathers also at about the same time, but because they weren't in touch anymore, neither of them was aware of it, that was all.

Not only that, but the marriages they made had helped with their careers. Wang Aishu's wife had a good bunch of relatives, in the ceramic tiles business—a huge enterprise, and Wang Aishu became a manager in their company—and he learned everything about the business, wore gold necklaces, drove an S-Class Mercedes. Peng Fei, because of his leg, had gone into administration in his office, and before you knew it he was section chief. Of course the constant banquet drinking was tiring, and his



的一个精通业务的经理,戴着金链,开着大奔。

彭飞则因为瘸腿的缘故,在办公室干起了行政工作,转眼也混上了正科级。虽然疲于各种茅台酒局,成条成条的中华烟还霉在了柜子里,但怎么说呢,没有这些,彭飞觉得也不对。

就这样,转眼就过去了几年。然后他们在一场葬礼上重逢了。

这个死去的人叫“日本人”。当然,这是网名。直到二人赶到前者的灵堂,才知道“日本人”真名叫刘春华。也就是说,他们都曾经是一个QQ群的网友。刘春华正是这个QQ群的发起人。这个群以交流电影、文学和性行为为主旨。那年头大家聊兴很浓,几乎每天每时每刻,都有人在群里发言。彭飞和王爱书也是其中的活跃分子,当他们获知身在同城的时候,就互相私聊了起来,然后才有本文开头部分的相见。在湘琴酒家,他们除了吃仔公鸡烧毛豆和回锅肉,自然主要延续群里的话题,并且多以“日本人”的观点展开讨论。说白了,“日本人”不仅是群的发起人和创始人,也是精神领袖。支撑“日本人”的据说主要是学识。群里所有的人都知道,“日本人”拥有高学历高收入,在北京有个公司,早年留过洋也日过外国女人,此外还写过热播电视剧,出过几大本畅销书,无论是学问和见

drawers were stuffed with mouldering high-end cigarettes, but—what could you do—without all that, Peng Fei would have thought there was something missing.

And just like that, in the blink of an eye, several years had passed. Then they ran into each other at a funeral.

The dead guy was called “The Japanese.” Of course that was just his username. Only when they were actually at the mourning hall did they find out that his real name was Liu Chunhua—Spring Flourishing. Which is all just to say that they had all been members of the same QQ group. Liu Chunhua had been the founder of the QQ group, actually. The group had been devoted mostly to talking about movies, literature, and sexual practices. In those years people had really been into online chatting, at practically every moment of every hour of every day someone was messaging something to the group. Peng Fei and Wang Aishu had been among the livelier participants, and when they had found out that they were living in the same city, they started PMing each other and then there was the meeting that you will find described at the beginning of this story. At the Zither of Hunan Inn, besides eating fresh soybeans with chicken and twice-cooked pork, they had of course largely pursued the chatgroup themes, mostly taking The Japanese’s views as their point of departure. To put it plainly, The Japanese was not only the founder and creator of the group, they had also been the spiritual leader. The pillar on which these views rested was his academic knowledge. Everyone in the chatgroup knew that The Japanese had an advanced degree and a lofty income, that he owned a company, and had in younger years studied abroad and also fucked foreign girls, and furthermore that he had also written a popular TV series, published a number of bestsellers— so no matter whether it was academic or street smarts, The Japanese was a cut above opinionated dumbasses like Peng Fei and Wang Aishu who had never left their own little corner.

识,“日本人”都远高于彭飞王爱书这种始终都困于一隅却又总是自以为是的蠢货。

在二人吃回锅肉的日子里,他们还曾恬不知耻地邀请“日本人”:如果路过南京的话,二人一定会尽地主之谊——到湘琴酒家吃回锅肉。血腥打斗事件导致的绝交之后,群虽然还健在,但不知为何,彭飞和王爱书陡然变得沉默寡言起来。

这可能有时代的因素。博客微博什么的之后,大家不太爱聊QQ了,包括群。彭飞这么总结道。

但是,群的副主以及其他群友所传播的消息还是被彭飞和王爱书所知道了。那个多事的家伙不仅旨在告诉大家,咱们的领袖“日本人”不幸患癌逝世,还希望大家争取前往葬礼为死者送行。地址和联系人手机附录其后。一股青春和友情地老天荒的气息扑面而来。确实去了不少群友,但这未必是出于哀悼之情,有的是想趁机出门透透气,比如彭飞,有的则是听说“日本人”老家那个地方山清水秀,比如王爱书。后者在葬礼当天就亲耳听到一个千里迢迢赶来的女网友在一条溪流边赞叹:“啊呀,这里的水真清啊,可以直接装瓶当矿泉水吗?我要做大自然的搬运工。”

In the days when the two of them had eaten twice-cooked pork together, they had once shamelessly invited The Japanese to join them—if he should happen to pass through Nanjing, the two of them would do their best for him as hosts—treating him to twice-cooked pork at the The Zither of Hunan. After the break occasioned by the bloody brawl, and although the groupchat still went on, but—who knows why—Peng Fei and Wang Aishu had turned suddenly into silent lurkers on the chat.

It might have had something to do with the era. After blogs and Weibo and so on, people stopped chatting on QQ so much, including the groupchats. That was Peng Fei's take on it.

All the same, the message sent by the assistant manager of the groupchat had come to the attention of Peng Fei and Wang Aishu. The assistant, a busybody, had not only let everyone know that their leader The Japanese had sadly died of cancer, but had also expressed the hope that everyone would try to make it to the funeral to see him off. The address and the contact number were appended at the bottom. There was a whiff of youth and of friendship-is-forever about it, and it assaulted the senses. More than a few of the groupchat members really did show up, although that might not have been entirely because of mourning, some of them were just taking the opportunity to get some fresh air—e.g. Peng Fei—and some of them had heard that “The Japanese” was from a place renowned for its green hills and clear water—e.g. Wang Aishu. The latter had heard with his own ears, on the day of the funeral, a girl from the chat who had come from the other end of the country, saying in fulsome praise of a stream, “Wow, the water here really is clear, can I just dip my bottle in and drink it like mineral water? I'm going to export the stuff.”

日本人或刘春华自知死期不远,请求家人将自己从北京拖回老家。在中国,所有山清水秀的地方同样也是穷地方,誉为穷山恶水其实更为恰当。所以当彭飞和王爱书分别赶到的时候,完全无法想象那个在 QQ 群里无比高端睿智的精神领袖“日本人”原来出自这么个穷山恶水。他的家很破败,大概还是清代的房子,所谓祖屋。猪圈就在卧室的窗外,一年四季应该都能闻到猪屎的恶臭。而且刘春华的父母也是彻头彻尾的山里人,矮小黝黑,穿着七十年代的衣裳。更要命的是,那个负责召集和接待各位网友的家伙还背着刘春华的家人告诉大家,刘春华生前欠了一屁股债,希望大家捐助一点以尽绵薄之力。彭飞没有带多少现金,山村亦无 ATM,只好向王爱书借了点,并保证回去当天就还。后者哈哈一笑,摆摆手,说,权当以前在湘琴酒家欠下的埋单钱。前者岂能认可,表示,那是那,这是这。总之二人口头上很是谦让了一番。

也就是说,在葬礼上的相遇,看上去使彭飞和王爱书前嫌尽弃言归于好了。他们共同瞻仰了“日本人”的遗容,老实说,这家伙长得真不怎么样。

我以为他很高大英俊呢。彭飞说。

为什么还戴眼镜,你说给一个死人戴上眼镜到底是什么意思?王爱书说。

The Japanese aka Liu Chunhua, knowing that the grim reaper was at the door, had asked his family to drag him back home from Beijing. In China, any place with green mountains and clean water is bound to be poverty-stricken, in fact it would be more accurate to praise them as pauper's mountains and unlucky waters. So when Peng Fei and Wang Aishu made their separate ways there, they just couldn't believe that the incomparably wise spiritual leader The Japanese had come from one of these poor and unlucky places. His home was derelict, it was probably from the Qing Dynasty, what you might call the ancestral home. The pigpen was just outside the bedroom window, so you could probably smell the stench of pigshit all year round. And Liu Chunhua's parents were yokels through and through, short and dark, wearing clothes from the 1970s. Even more dispiriting was the fact that the guy in charge of assembling and taking care of all the groupchat friends had told them, without letting the parents know, that Liu Chunhua had died owing a shitload of cash, and that he hoped they would all make small donations, anything they could manage. Peng Fei hadn't brought much cash, and a boonie town like this didn't have an ATM, and so there was nothing for it but to borrow a bit from Wang Aishu, and make sure to pay him back the same day, when they got back to town. The latter had given a big belly-laugh, waved him off, and said they would treat it as money owing from the bill at the Zither of Hunan. The former wouldn't accept, saying, that was then and this is now. All in all, the two of them went through a good long round of polite refusals.

Which is to say that the meeting at funeral apparently had caused Peng Fei and Wang Aishu to forget their falling-out and make up. They both gazed reverently at The Japanese's body, though to tell the truth, the guy really wasn't much to look at.

I thought he would be so tall and handsome, Peng Fei said.

更让大家感到震惊的是,“日本人”刘春华还睡上了棺材,被几个壮硕的网友抬到了山脚埋了。山脚全是坟茔,山腰略少,山顶没有。这一点是不是说明,佯装尊敬死者的活人其实仍然懒得把他们埋得更高一点?震惊不在于土葬的违规,而在于其古老。一个叱咤于网络的网络名人,最后躺在一具棺材里被埋在古老的山村里,这到底是怎么回事呢?

虽然预签的机票时间不同,但彭飞和王爱书回到当地省城是同路的,只有那里有机场。

路上他们谈了谈各自这些年的情况是必然的。彼此都露出很欣慰的样子,然后用对死者的扼腕长叹来强化这一欣慰。他们甚至还萌生了超脱和达观的念头,眼前闪烁着马上就要面临的中年的景象。但因不够明晰,没有深入交流。不过,还是有个东西堵在二人之间,这倒是彼此心知肚明的。

咳咳,王爱书没忍住,但还是有点难为情,我想问你一个事,可以吗?

当然。

你当初到底想说什么?往事真是不堪回首,王爱书觉得自己脸都红了,就,就是,我俩打架那次?

Why is he wearing glasses, what's the idea of putting glasses on a dead guy? Wang Aishu said.

Even more astonishing was that while The Japanese Liu Chunhua slept in his coffin, a few hearty groupchat friends carried him to the foot of the mountain to bury him. There were graves all around the foot of the mountain, half-way up the mountain and none at the top. Did that show that the people feigning respect for the dead were actually too lazy to bury them up a little higher? What was astonishing about it was not the fact of burial, which was against the cremation regulation, but how ancient it all was. An internet celebrity, screaming all over the web, and in the end he lies in this ancient village— what was that all about?

Although they had booked different plane tickets, they took the same way back to the provincial capital, where there was an airport.

On the way they naturally discussed their situation over the last few years. Both seemed pretty gratified, and then sighed and wrung their hands about the deceased to reinforce their own gratification. Some unconventional, philosophical thoughts even occurred to them, as the prospect of imminent middle age glittered in front of them. But because the prospect couldn't be clearly enough discerned, they didn't discuss it deeply. Still, there was some kind of impasse between the two of them, they both knew that well enough in their hearts.

Huh, huh, Wang Aishu couldn't stop himself, though he said also with some embarrassment, there's something I want to ask you, OK?

Of course.

What did you want to say in the first place? It really doesn't do to look back at the past, and Wang Aishu felt that he was blushing. I mean, you know, the time we got into a fight?

我忘了,鹏飞其实已经猜到在葬礼上重逢之后迟早会面对这个问题,但王爱书一旦提出来,他还是紧张,真的,忘了。

哦。

嗯。

是,毕竟过去好几年了。

是啊。

过了好一会儿。

可能,鹏飞不确定地说,可能我当时是希望我俩不要那么吃饭?

那怎么吃?

呃,比如,比如我们当时应该喝点酒?

I forget, Peng Fei had in fact already guessed that the meeting at the funeral would sooner or later result in this question, but when Wang Aishu really did bring it up, he was still nervous: really, I forget.

Oh.

Uh-huh.

Yeah, since it was years ago.

Yeah.

It's been quite a while.

Maybe, Peng Fei said uncertainly, what you wanted was for us not to eat like that anymore?

Well then how?

Uh, for example, maybe we should have had something to drink?

## Translating Vivienne Cleven's Aboriginal English in *Bitin' Back*

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Vivienne Cleven is an Australian writer and a member of the Kamilaroi Aboriginal group, whose land spans Southern Queensland and Northern New South Wales. *Bitin' Back* is her first novel; it was published in 2001 after it won the David Unaipon Award for unpublished Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) authors.

The novel broaches a number of societal issues, including racial prejudice and gender identification, while painting readers a true to life picture of what small-town living in rural Australia looks like for people identifying as Aboriginal. The narrator is a forty-year-old Aboriginal woman named Mavis, and the story revolves around her twenty-one-year-old son Nevil, who wakes up one morning asking to be called Jean Rhys and gendered as a woman. This triggers a series of events that upsets Mavis's uneventful existence and challenges her conventional mindset. The overall tone of the novel is humorous, which is largely due to its narrator's use of language: Cleven chose to have her main character speak in Aboriginal English (hereafter AbE), a term which encompasses "overlapping varieties of the dialect(s) of English spoken by Aboriginal people" (Eades 3) across various groups and geographical areas in Australia. The primarily oral nature of this vernacular renders Cleven's protagonist more vivacious, and the fact that she uses her own individual variety of it creates a feeling of realism. Anita Heiss, an Aboriginal author and renowned scholar, praised the richness and uniqueness of that language, which she humorously dubbed "Mavis-speak". Cleven's choice of language can be regarded as a twofold ideological statement: by choosing to write in AbE, she positions herself against mainstream beliefs that this variety is not fit for literary purposes; and by having her "idiomatic narrator" (Nolan 44) appropriate the language and turn it into her own singular variety, she takes a stand for individual linguistic and artistic expression among Aboriginal people, especially women – who have historically had an even harder time than men making their voices heard, having had to challenge sexist and paternalist representations as well as colonialist ones (Ferrier 37).

The variety of AbE used in Cleven's novel shares a number of linguistic features with other non-standard varieties<sup>1</sup> of English, mainly at the grammatical level, while non-standard features located at the lexical, phonological and pragmatic levels are mostly specific to AbE (Butcher 626). The passage I selected is the beginning of the first chapter of *Bitin' Back*; it sets the tone for the rest of the story, and contains examples of most of the non-standard features used by Cleven throughout the book. Among these are grammatical ones, such as the lack of 's' in the third person singular of certain verbs ("the room stink", Cleven 1), the deletion of the 'be' copula ("she too white for the others", 6), the use of perfective 'done' – both in its standard ("She done tell everyone", *ibid.*) and its non-standard form ("Biggest load a goona a woman doned ever heard", 4), and the use of the contraction 'ain't' as a marker of negation ("Ain't no one gonna let the man...", 5), which are all characteristics that AbE shares with African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Lappin-Fortin 460-461). Cleven also borrows lexical items from her traditional language ("womba", 1; "yarndi", 3 "goona", 4) and a certain number of terms belonging to Standard Australian English (hereafter SAE), but which are etymologically related to a traditional language, or which refer strictly to Aboriginal cultural realities ("myall", 1). At the level of pragmatics, AbE relexifies concepts which existed at first

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term "non-standard" to refer to varieties of a language which have not locally been established as the standard variety at the institutional level.

only in traditional languages; in this excerpt, for instance, “yarnin” (13) refers to the action of exchanging information, telling stories (Harkins 73). Lastly, Cleven’s language presents spelling alterations that reflect the manner in which speakers of AbE may talk, in terms of phonology: certain long vowels and diphthongs are shortened (“black fella”, 3), the final ‘d’ in some words tends to disappear (“that ol girl”, 6), and the spelling of conjunctions “of” and “and” is reduced to a single letter to mimic a non-standard pronunciation (“one a those”, “good n proper”, *ibid*). Aside from other similar alterations, one very noticeable characteristic of “Mavis-speak” is her tendency to slur some of her words, resulting in ellipses of whole syllables (“spose”, 5; “spectable”, 7).

In addition to the abovementioned features, some traits of Cleven’s writing are specific to her main character’s idiom; in particular, lexical creativity and a profusion of imagery add to the novel’s liveliness. The very first sentence of the first chapter is a good example of the kind of images that Cleven frequently summons up, when she compares Nevil to “a skinny black question mark” because of the position he sleeps in. Further down in the chapter, Mavis demonstrates her creative abilities by wondering at the “cockadoodle name” (3) that Nevil has chosen for himself.

My position as a non-Aboriginal researcher translating into a language holding more cultural and literary prestige than Aboriginal English in the global market necessarily entails a reflection of an ethical nature, because “the flow of translations continues to actively promote the power of First World cultures” (Simon 16). Issues relating to ethics have grown to become a major subject for debate in the field of Translation Studies and the world of translation more broadly, as marginalized literary voices strive for better representation and recognition. Brownlie states that “there has thus been a politically motivated revival of prescriptive approaches towards translation, based on the recognition of unfair power differentials in and between cultures and languages”, and dubs these “committed approaches” (79). This revival can be viewed as a reaction to the decades-long tendency of translated texts to standardize the varieties found in source texts, effectively erasing markers of cultural and linguistic identity. However, such a change in paradigm also comes with its own challenges: as the academic world increasingly moves towards a postcolonial framework when dealing with marginalized texts and authors, translators must take great care not to slide back into a homogenizing view. Gayatri Spivak, an Indian scholar known for asserting her status as a member of what she calls a subaltern culture, warns that “depth of commitment to correct cultural politics [...] is sometimes not enough” (318), and that in order to produce an ethical translation, one must become intimate with the text, its history, the history of the language used and of the author themselves. This, she argues, reduces the risk of translating all marginalized languages into a sort of generic tongue which Spivak dubs “translatese” (315). My aim in translating *Bitin’ Back* as part of a doctoral thesis is to avoid this homogenizing tendency; the research I am conducting parallel to the translation process is intended to provide me with the linguistic, cultural, historical, political and ideological information needed for my translation to qualify as an ethical one. Of course, academic knowledge cannot replace first-hand experience of a language and its cultural history, but in this specific case, the object of my study being a literary representation of Aboriginal English, a committed translation approach backed by proper contextual information and an in-depth theoretical reflection should allow my translation to establish an ethical foundation for the literary translation of Aboriginal English into French.

Venuti is a proponent of committed translation, and advocates for a “minoritizing” strategy (93) when translating minority languages, in the view of avoiding homogenization, and promoting cultural and linguistic heterogeneity. This strategy is relevant to my case study, and I strived to preserve the “minority elements” (94) of Cleven’s novel; however, as Cronin points out, any systematic approach runs the risk of undermining local specificities (171); Tymoczko also declares that “no single strategy of translation has a privileged position in the

exercise of power or resistance” (*Enlarging Translation*, 45). Foreignization might be appropriate as a form of cultural resistance in certain contexts, but less so in others: a text translated using a systematic foreignizing strategy carries a heavy load of cultural and linguistic information, which the receiving audience might have a hard time assimilating, especially if the audience in question is unfamiliar with the source culture and language (Tymoczko, “Postcolonial writing”, 22-23). In such a case, the risk is high of losing readers’ engagement with the text, which would defeat the purpose of a committed approach. Depending on the particulars of a situation, translating a marginalized variety using a conscious domesticating strategy and proper justification may allow the translated text to be more easily accepted by the intended readership – which then makes it easier for similar marginalized works to make their way into the dominant literary system. This is how Tymoczko describes the origins of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish literary revival in her widely circulated work *Translating in a Postcolonial Context: Early Irish Literature in English Translation* (173), and a fitting example of how domestication can, in the right context, be a resistant strategy.

My translation ethics, in this particular case, is a compromise between two extremes: although I aimed for a predominantly minoritizing translation, the unavoidable linguistic and cultural distance between Aboriginal English and Aboriginal literature on the one hand, and French language and literature on the other, implies that a fully minoritizing translated text would hardly be accessible, not to mention attractive, to a French readership. Since my objective in the long run is to try and publish my translation of *Bitin’ Back*, and given that, in Pym’s words, no translation ethics can be defined without taking into consideration commercial constraints (133), I opted for partial domestication when I deemed it adequate. I thus established a hierarchy between the various non-standard features listed above, and to preserve the specific individual identity of the text and its cultural rooting, I gave priority, whenever possible, to the elements that Cleven’s language does not share with other non-standard varieties of English.

Lexical borrowings are the most conspicuous culturally-bound items in the novel, and the ones which clearly identify the work as belonging to Aboriginal literature. Fortunately, I was able to leave them all untouched in the translation, and to rely on the surrounding context to ensure understandability. The French sentence “Complètement womba, moi, des fois!” comes after a statement by Mavis where she acknowledges she is having crazy thoughts, which gives a sufficient clue to the meaning of the borrowed word; if that is not enough, the adverb “complètement”, which is frequently used in collocation with “fou/folle” (crazy) in French, acts as an additional clue. Similarly, the first occurrence of “yarndi” is preceded by the mention of “weedeatin”, which translates to “la fumette” (a slang word for smoking weed), and this word, albeit a slang word, is explicit enough for the reader to get the meaning of the borrowed term – marijuana. In the following occurrences, readers can appeal to their memory and uncover the meaning again, with or without the explanatory context. The last borrowing, “goona”, is a little less evident than the first two, but the sentence in which it is used should allow an attentive reader to decipher its signification, given that “ramassis” is very often employed in the phrase “un ramassis de conneries” (a load of bullshit). “Goonna” literally refers to excrements (Arthur 97), but similarly to the use that speakers of English make of the word “shit”, it can figuratively refer to lies or unwise words.

If the treatment of lexical borrowings seems relatively straightforward, SAE terms originating from traditional languages or relexified terms are more problematic. It was, for instance, impossible to translate “myall”, whose meaning does not seem to be fixed,<sup>2</sup> in a way

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<sup>2</sup> Definitions proposed by online dictionaries vary slightly: originating from the Dharuk word “mayal/miyal”, “myall” is defined as “a native Australian living independently from society” (Collins online); “a stranger; an ignorant person” (obsolete) or “an Aborigine living according to tradition” (Wiktionary); “a wild and independent native Australian” (Wordnik); “wild, uncivilized” (Merriam-Webster online).



that conveys the cultural specificity and origin of the word. I chose to use a common slang term, “paumé”, with an approaching signification and which fits the context, so that the register, at least, is accurate. A more satisfactory alternative was possible for “yarnin”, which is used by speakers of AbE and SAE alike: taking an existing French verb (“discuter”) and using it as a noun (“une discute”) creates an effect of unfamiliarity, while still allowing the reader to understand. I applied the same strategy when translating neologisms and lexical inventions, although I sometimes had to find means of compensation: the “cockadoodle name”, for instance, finds no equivalent in French, as creating a word could risk impeding readers’ comprehension. Instead, lexical creativity can be displaced elsewhere in the text. For instance, the word “confusionné” does not actually exist in French; it is a noun (“confusion”) conjugated as a verb; similarly, “parpillé” is not a French word, but the adjective “éparpillé” in which I removed the first syllable. This peculiar usage is intended to mirror Cleven’s clever and creative use of language.

This is also the strategy I endeavoured to apply when translating non-standard phonological features of Cleven’s language, reflected in spelling alterations. It is, of course, quite difficult to apply the exact same alterations to the French spelling, but what can be attempted is to recreate resembling alterations. Regarding shortened diphthongs and more generally vowel alterations, I operated a few changes in certain words, such as “aujourd’hui” – usually spelled “aujourd’hui” (today); as for ellipses of letters or entire syllables, I tried to replicate them in French, notably by taking out the “r” or “l” in word endings containing a consonant, the letter “r”/“l” and the vowel “e”. This results in “autre” (other) being spelled “aute”, or “table” being spelled “tabe”. It is, in fact, a common way for French people to pronounce such words when speaking in a casual manner, but it is never transcribed on paper, hence an effect of foreignness. In addition, I applied contractions to pronouns and short grammatical words (“j’décide”, “d’porter”).

The abovementioned non-standard elements are preserved as often as possible in the translation, but the features located at the grammatical level, which can for the most part be found in other non-standard dialects of English, have to be toned down somewhat when transferring into French, especially since I seek to avoid representing the characters in the novel as caricatures or as being stupid. However, Mavis does belong to the working class and has received little formal education, which is reflected in her manner of speaking; therefore, ascribing an entirely fluid, grammatically correct variety to her would not do either. The solution I ended up choosing was to use the informal register, occasional profanities, and unusual syntactic structures – “[...] la chambre pue qu’on dirait qu’il a pas ouvert depuis dix ans”; “J’m fais la voix douce” – which add to the impression of incorrectness, without there being actual grammatical errors, except on rare cases.

Vivienne Cleven’s novel is a rich and complex literary object. My translation is an attempt to convey as much as possible its linguistic playfulness and cultural specificity, so that a French readership may get a glimpse of the work of a talented Aboriginal author, and be introduced to a language variety which takes them out of their comfort zone. I intend to submit the manuscript to publishing houses that have already published literary works by Aboriginal writers or authors from other marginalized cultures, and whose readership is likely to be more receptive to non-standard texts than the average reader. However, it is also quite possible that I will have to make alterations to the translation before publication, if the publisher deems it too discomforting. If this is the case, I shall take care that any changes I make remain aligned with my committed approach.

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**Bitin' Back by Vivienne Clevon**  
**Extract from chapter one**

*Jean Arrives*

*The boy is curled up in his bed like a skinny black question mark. Ain't like he got a lot of time to be layin bout. A woman gotta keep him on his toes. That's me job; to keep the boy goin. Hard but, bein a single mother n all. Be all right if the boy had a father. Arhhh, a woman thinks a lot a shit, eh? A woman's thoughts get mighty womba sometimes!*

I pinch me nose closed; the room stink like it been locked up for years. I shake Nevil awake. 'Nev. Nevil, love. Come on wake up. Ya got a interview today, down at the dole office.'

'Wha... What?' He rolls over, the sheet twisted round his sweat-soaked body. He rubs his eyes and looks up at me with sleepy confusion.

'The dole office. Interview. Ya know, today. In bout thirty minutes. Come on, no use layin there like a leech.'

'Who, what?' He struggles up on his bony elbows, givin me a sour gape of bewilderment. *The boy look myall this mornin.*

'On ya bloody feet. Don't want none a ya tomfoolery today.' I look at the beer bottles, the bong and all them books scattered on the floor. I eyeball the titles — *Better Sex, How to Channel, Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, Ernest Hemingway. Yep, was always a mad one for readin, our Nev.*

I turn round. He's still in bed, his arms folded behind his head as he stares up at the ceiling.

'Jesus Christ! Get outta friggin bed will ya! A woman got better things to do than

**La Contr'attaque de Vivienne Clevon**  
**Extrait du chapitre un**

**Traduit par Célestine Denèle**

*L'arrivée de Jane*

*Le ptit est tout plié dans son lit comme un point d'interrogation noir maigrichon. C'est pas comme s'il a l'temps pour traînasser comme ça. Faut qu'i se bouge le cul. C'est mon job ça, de lui bouger l'cul. Pas facile, vu que j'suis mère toute seule et tout. Ça serait mieux s'il avait un père, ce ptit. Aarhh, elle s'en fait des réflexions pourries, hein ? Complètement womba, moi, des fois !*

J'me pince le nez ; la chambre pue qu'on dirait qu'il a pas ouvert depuis dix ans. Je secoue Nevil pour le réveiller.

— Nev. Nev, poussin. Allez lève-toi, t'as rendez-vous aujourd'hui à l'agence.

— Hm... Quoi? I se retourne avec le drap enroulé autour de son corps tout suant. I se frotte les yeux et me regarde, tout confusionné de sommeil.

— L'agence. Pour l'emploi. T'as un entretien. Aujourd'hui, tu sais bien. Dans à peu près une demieure. Allez, ça sert à rien d'rester collé à ton lit comme une sangsue.

— Qui ? Quoi ?

I réussit tant bien qu'mal à se mette sur ses coudes pointus et pis i me regarde la bouche ouverte, complètement ahuri. *Il a l'air paumé ce matin, le ptit.*

— Hophop on s'lève nom d'un chien ! Pas de bouffonneries aujourd'hui.

Je regarde les bouteilles de bière, le bang et le tas de bouquins étalés par terre. Je zieute les titres: *Faire mieux l'amour, Comment communiquer avec les esprits. Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, Ernest Hemingway. Ouais, l'a toujours été dingue de bouquins, mon Nev.*

J'me retourne. Il est toujours dans le lit, les mains derrière sa tête, à regarder le plafond.

— Bon sang ! Tu vas sortir de ce foutu lit ! Ta mère elle a mieux à faire que d'enfiler des perles ici toute la journée avec toi ! Allez Nevie, poussin.

piss bout here all day whit you! Come on, Nevie, love.

I soften me voice to a low crawly tone.

‘Mum’s got bingo. Might hit the jackpot, eh?’

‘Who’s Nevil?’ he ask, starin down at his hairy, mole-flecked arms.

‘Wha ...? What’s wrong whit ya? Ya sick?’ I peer at his face.

‘I’m not sick. And don’t call me Nevil!’

He nods his head and his bottom lip drops over, like he’s gonna bawl baby.

‘Yeah, if you’re not Nevil then call me a white woman!’ I sit on the edge of his bed, laughter bubblin in the back of me throat. *Was always a joker, our Nev.*

‘I’m not Nevil, whoever that is!’ He busts his gut in sudden anger, his hands curled into fists.

‘Talk shit,’ I say, waitin for the punchline.

‘How dare you talk to me like that!’ His voice sounds like he really true means it as he glares sharp eye at me.

‘I’ll speak to ya any friggin way I wanna! Now get outta bed before I kick that black arse of yours!’ I stand up, me hands on me hips, foot tappin the floorboards. *Don’t push me, Sonny Boy.*

He pulls the sheet up to his face, his brown eyes peepin out from the cover.

‘Call me Jean,’ he whispers.

‘Jean! Jean!’

The laughter jump out, I double over holdin onto me gut, heehawin and gaspin for breath. ‘Yeah, good one Nev, bloody funny.’ I take control of meself when I suddenly realise how still and quiet he is. *Not like Nevie.*

‘Call me Jean – Jean Rhys, that’s my real name’, he says, droppin the sheet, showin his thick black chest hair.

J’m fais la voix douce et j’lui dis tout bas et tout doucement :

— Mman doit aller au bingo. P’tête que je vais gagner le gros lot, eh ?

— Qui est Nevil? qu’i demande en regardant ses bras poilus parpillés de grains d’beauté.

— Qu... ? Ça va pas ? T’es malade ?

J’examine sa tête de près.

— Je suis pas malade. Et ne m’appelle pas Nevil !

I secoue la tête et sa lève d’en bas tremblote comme s’i va se mette à pleurnicher.

— C’est ça ouais, si t’es pas Nevil moi j’suis blanche !

Je m’assois au bord de son lit, avec un rire qui commence à me chatouiller le fond d’la gorge. *L’a toujours été blagueur, mon Nev.*

— Je ne suis pas Nevil, qui c’est, lui ?! il explose d’un coup de colère, avec ses poings tout serrés.

— Vas-y, balance, je dis en attendant la chute de la blague.

— Comment oses-tu me parler sur ce ton !

Il a sa voix des moments sérieux et i me regarde fixe avec des yeux noir-colère.

— J’t parle comme je veux, nom d’un chien! Matenant tu te lèves avant que j’t botte ton cul de noir !

J’m mets debout, les mains sur les hanches, en tap-tapant du pied sur le plancher. *Me pousse pas à bout, mon ptit gars.*

I tire le drap jusqu’à sa tête, jusqu’à ce que ses yeux marrons sont les seuls trucs qui sortent de la couette.

— Appelle-moi Jane, il chuchote.

— Jane ! Jane !

Le rire fuse et j’m plie en deux en me tenant les côtes, j’arrive pu à respirer tellement j’m bidonne.

— Elle est bonne, Nev, ça oui, sacrément bonne.

J’m reprends et pis je me rends compte qu’il est vachement calme et silencieux. *Ça lui ressemble pas, à Nevie.*

— Appelle-moi Jane. Jane Rhys, c’est mon vrai nom, qu’i dit en lâchant le drap qui cachait ses longs poils de torse noirs.

‘What the fuck ...! Are you on drugs, son? Hard shit, eh?’ I peer at his face, waitin for a confession. *The boy flyin high or what?*

‘Nope. Just call me Jean.’

‘Jean. Right, I get the joke, ha, ha, funny,’ I say, takin a closer look at him but seein nothin outta the ordinary.

‘It’s not funny! I can’t see any humour in my name. How would you like me to make fun of you, huh?’

I walk over to the bed. ‘Somethin real wrong whit ya, Nev?’ I drop me eyeballs down at him. *Too much smokin pot n pissin up all that grog is what does it. How the friggin hell did he come up with a cockadadoodle name like Jean Reece, for God’s sake! A woman’s name!*

‘Just remember I’m Jean Rhys, the famous writer,’ he says, flashin his chompers as he picks at his nails. As though to say: ‘Are you madfucked, Ma? Can’t ya see who I am?’

‘A writer! A woman writer! Jesus Christ Almighty! Next you be tellin me yer white!’ Me hand flies to me chest, as though to stop me thumpin heart. *Weedeatin, that’s what’s wrong whit him. Yarndi messin whit his scone.*

‘Yep, sure am,’ he answers, throwin his legs over the side of the bed.

‘Nevil, stop this rot! You startin to worry poor ol mum here, son. Anythin you wanna talk bout? Girlfriends, football, yarndi?’ *Sometime talkin help clean out the shit.*

‘Nope. Sure appreciate if you’d call me by my right name though,’ he says, one hand scratchin his arse, the other rubbin his stubbly chin.

‘Okay, Nevil. Nevil Arthur Dooley, male, twenty-one years old, black fella from the bush.’ I give the boy a smooth n oily smile. *Gotcha! Take that one!*

— C’est quoi c’bordel ! ... T’as pris de la drogue, fiston ? D’la drogue dure, c’est ça ?

Je regarde bien sa tête en attendant qu’il avoue. *Y’est complètement perché ou quoi ?*

— Non. Je veux juste que tu m’appelles Jane.

— Jane. Ok, j’ai pigé la blague, ha, ha, très marrant, je dis en le regardant de plus près, mais je vois rien de pas normal.

— Ce n’est pas marrant! Je ne vois pas ce qu’il y a de drôle dans mon nom. Tu aimerais, toi, que je me moque de toi ? Hein ?

J’me rapproche du lit.

— T’as vraiment un truc qui va pas, Nev ?

J’baisse mes mirettes vers lui. *Ça, c’est pasqu’i fume trop d’herbe et qu’i s’enfile tout cette gnôle, c’est sûr. Comment il a trouvé un nom aussi abracadabrant que Jane Risse, nom de dieu ! Un nom d’femme !*

— Dis-toi juste que je suis Jane Rhys, la célèbre écrivaine, i dit, et i me fait un sourire plein de chicots en se curant les ongles. Comme si i me disait: ‘T’es pas bien, Mam ? Tu vois pas qui j’suis ?’

— Une écrivaine ! Une écrivaine femme ! Foutu nom de nom ! Et après tu vas m’dire que t’es blanc !

J’m porte la main à la poitrine pour essayer d’arrêter mon palpitant qui bat trop fort. *La fumette, c’est ça qui va pas. C’est la yarndi qui lui tape sur le casque.*

— Ouep, c’est ça, i répond en balançant ses jambes hors du lit.

— Nevil, arrête tes conneries ! Tu commences à faire peur à ta vieille manman là, fiston. Tu veux m’parler de queque chose ? Les filles, le foot, la yarndi ?

*Des fois parler ça aide à évacuer tout c’qui va pas.*

— Non. Par contre, j’aimerais vraiment bien que tu m’appelles par mon vrai nom, i dit en s’grattant le cul d’une main et son menton mal rasé de l’aute.

— Ok, Nevil. Nevil Arthur Dooley, homme de vingt-et-un ans, noir sorti du bush.

J’lui fais un sourire tout miellé. *J’t’ai eu ! Hein !*

‘Damn you! It’s Jean, Jean Reece! J-E-A-N! RHY-S! Get it!’ he yells. Spit flies across the room and lands on me face.

‘Oh righto, Jean. Is it miss or missus?’ I decide to go along with him, to play out this little joke.

*Jean Rhys, eh. Biggest load a goona a woman doned ever heard.*

‘Miss’ll do fine, thank you, Mum.’ He smiles, then drops his head n looks down at the rubbish-strewn floor.

‘Well, Miss Jean Rhys, what may I ask have you got in those undies there, huh?’

I throw him a spinner. *Take the bait, boy. Our Nev n his jokes. A regular commeediann.*

‘That’s crass. What do you think’s in there?’ He spins round, grabs the bath towel off the window ledge and winds it round his skinny hips.

‘Well... I really don’t know any more.’

‘Hmmpph, stupid question, Mother. Now where are my clothes?’ he asks in a pissy sorta way, runnin his tongue cross his thick-set lips as he catches a glance a hisself in the mirror.

‘In the wash, Nevil — I mean Jean.’ I walk over and stand behind him as he stares at hisself.

‘Have you ever seen such bewdiful hair, huh?’ he says, his fingers tryin to comb through the baby arse fluff on top of his scone.

‘Yeah,’ I whisper, by this time knowin somethin is very wrong whit me only kid.

I catch his eyes and look into them, wonderin what mischief lays there. I see nothin. His eyes hold no deep secrets. I reach out and touch his shoulder.

‘Tell Mum, Nevil, tell Mum.’

— Merde ! C’est Jane, Jane Risse ! J-A-N-E RHY-S ! T’as compris ! qu’il braille. Des postillons volent à travers la chambre et atterrissent sur ma tête.

— D’ac-o-d’ac, Jane. C’est madame ou mademoiselle ?

J’décide de rentrer dans son jeu et d’le laisser aller jusqu’au bout de sa ptite blague. *Jane Rhys, hein. C’est l’plus gros ramassis de goona que j’ai jamais entendu.*

— Mademoiselle, ça ira très bien, merci Mam.

I sourit pis baisse la tête et regarde le sol plein de trucs qui traînent.

— Et donc, Mâdemôiselle Jane Rhys, puis-je savoir ce qu’il y â dans vos sous-vêtements, hm ?

J’lui tends une perche, là. *Allez, prends-la, mon ptit gars. Sacré Nev et ses blagues. Un vrâai côôômmédien.*

— Tu es dégoûtante. Qu’est-ce qu’il y a à ton avis ?

I se tourne, attrape la serviette de douche sur le bord de la fenêtre et l’enroule autour de ses hanches maigrichonnes.

— Ben... J’suis pu vraiment sûre.

— Pfff, c’est stupide comme question, Maman. Bon, où sont mes fringues ? i demande l’air à moitié énervé. I passe sa langue sur ses lèvres épaisses et se reluque dans l’miroir.

— Au sale, Nevil... J’veux dire Jane.

J’vais me mette derrière lui pendant qu’i se regarde.

— Tu as déjà vu des cheveux aussi splendides ? i dit en essayant de coiffer avec ses doigts les trois poils de cul d’bébé qu’il a sur le crâne.

— Ouais, je dis tout doucement — matenant j’ai compris qu’y a vraiment queque chose qui tourne pas rond chez mon gamin.

J’croise son regard et je scrute un moment, en m’demandant quelles bêtises il peut bien y avoir au fond. Je vois rien. Y’a pas de grand secret dans ses yeux. Je tends le bras pour lui toucher l’épaule :

— Parle à ta manman, Nevil, allez.

I will him to answer me, to tell me somethin has happened, someone has paid him to pull this stuntin on me. *Ain't like Nev to he aresin bout like this. Talkin mad, sorta like he got that possessin stuff. A manwomanmanwoman. Like the boy mixin his real self up whit another person.*

'I need a frock. A nice one,' he says, pullin faces at hisself.

'A frock! Sweet Jesus, Nev, come on, love!'" I take a wonky step back from him, feelin like as though he's done punched me in the gut. *The boy is deadly serious.*

'You heard me. I can't very well get about in those things there, can I?' He points to a pile of dirty jeans.

'You have before.' I try to smooth him over, 'I can get a fresh pair of the line if ya want.'

I feel somethin grip me like death as I try to imagine me big-muscled, tall hairy son walkin round the town in a dress.

The shock brings vomit up to sit at the back of me throat. I realize with a sick despair that he means to wear a dress right or wrong. *He won't back out even for me. He's mad in the head. He's gone crazy n gay. A woman can't take it.*

*Now let me see, yeah, I member that ol girl long time past, this sorta thing happened to her. It make a woman wonder: ya got black fellas sayin they white. Ya got white fellas sayin they black. I just dunno what's racin round in they heads. Cos, when ya black, well, things get a bit tricky like. See now, if ya got a white fella then paint him up black n let the man loose on the world I reckon he won't last long. Yep, be fucked from go. But when ya got a black fella sayin he's a woman — a white woman at that! Well, the ol dice just roll n another direction. Ain't no one gonna let the man... boy, get away whit that! This here is dangerous business.*

J'veux qu'i me réponde, qu'i me dise qu'il s'est passé queque chose, que quequ'un l'a payé pour me faire ce sale tour. *Ça lui ressemble pas à Nev de faire le con comme ça, de dire n'importe quoi, un peu comme si y'était possédé, presque. Un hommefemmehomme femme. On dirait qu'i mélange son vrai lui avec quequ'un d'aute.*

— J'ai besoin d'une robe. Une jolie robe, il dit, en s'faisant des grimaces à lui-même.

— Une robe ? Mais bon sang, Nev, poussin !

J'me recule un peu de travers, en m'sentant comme si i m'avait mis un coup dans l'estomac. *Le ptit est archi-sérieux.*

— Je ne rigole pas. Je ne vais quand même pas me promener avec un de ces jeans-là, si ?

I me montre un tas de jeans sales.

— Ça t'a jamais dérangé.

J'essaie de l'amadouer un peu:

— J'peux aller en chercher un propre sur la corde à linge si tu veux.

J'sens queque chose de froid comme la mort m'envelopper en m'imaginant mon grand gars poilu et musclé s'balader en robe dans la ville.

J'suis tellement choquée que j'sens du vomi remonter dans ma gorge. J'comprends grise de désespoir qu'il a l'intention d'porter une robe coûte que coûte. *Même pour moi i va pas changer d'avis. Il est devenu fou. Fou et gay. a C'est trop à supporter pour une seule femme.*

*Attends, ouais, j'me rappelle cette pauvre fille y'a longtemps qui lui est arrivé pareil. On s'demande, après: t'as des Noirs qui disent qu'i sont blancs. T'as des Blancs qui disent qu'i sont noirs. Franchement j'sais pas ce qui leur court dans l'crâne. Pasque, quand t'es noir, ça peut vite devenir dangereux. Tu vois, si t'as un Blanc et que tu l'peins en noir et qu'tu l'envoies courir les rues m'est avis qu'i va pas tenir longtemps. Ouep, dès l'début il est foutu. Mais alors quand t'as un Noir qui dit qu'c'est une femme... une Blanche en plus ! Alors là c'est encore une aute affaire. Personne va le laisser s'en tirer c't'hom... ce gars-là ! C'est dangereux comme affaire ça.*



‘Well... I spose... you’ll... fit into a dress a mine. Tell me, what’s Gracie gonna think, eh?’

I shake me head at him, the idea comin to me as I speak.

‘She won’t like it, Gracie girl, havin a boyfriend walkin bout in women’s clothes. She won’t put up whit it. She’ll leave fer sure!’ I let it all out, jabbin the air whit me finger.

‘Well, too bad ain’t it. Anyway, who’s Gracie?’

Nev turns round to face me.

‘Don’t talk stupid. Gracie’s your girlfriend. Enough of this for once and all. I gotta go to bingo, the others’ll be waitin for me. So get dressed; hurry up.’

He walks toward the bathroom, heavin his shoulders up and down as he sighs and mumbles to himself. There’s somethin wrong whit the way he walks, steppin ballerina like as he goes down the hallway. Suddenly I wonder if our Nev is one a those.

*One of em homos. Well, they don’t call em that any more. Gay, that’s the word people use. Jesus Christ! Can ya wake up gay? Must do, Nevil did. But then again some people can con theyselves that they anythin. Thinkin of that ol girl, what was her name? It were Phyllis, Phyllis Swan. If a woman’s recollection is right, she were parted from her own mob by em government wankers; they reckon she too white for the others, eh. Too white, load a goon.*

*When she growed up a bit more her skin turned up real charcoal like. Yeah, she coloured into a piece a coal. Black as Harry’s arse.*

*The wankers say: she too black for us, send the girl back. So back she go to her mob.*

*They didn’t want her.*

*The whites didn’t want her. She was sorta stuck in the middle like. Piggy in de middle.*

*Now what she doned?*

— Euh... p’tête... P’tête que tu rentes dans une de mes robes. Mais dis donc elle va penser quoi Gracie, eh ?

L’idée m’vient en même temps que j’parle et je secoue la tête.

— Elle va pas aimer ça, la ptite Gracie, de voir son copain se balader habillé comme une fille. Ça, elle va pas le tolérer ! C’est sûr qu’elle va te quitter.

J’lui sors tout ça en agitant mon doigt en l’air.

— Ah, tant pis, hein. Et d’ailleurs, qui est Gracie ?

Nev se tourne pour me regarder.

— Fais pas l’idiot. C’est ta copine. Ça suffit matenant. J’dois aller au bingo, les autes vont m’attende. Alors habille-toi, dépêche.

I va jusqu’à la salle de bain, en haussant-baissant les épaules en même temps qu’i se marmonne des trucs à lui-même. Y’a un truc bizarre dans sa façon d’ marcher, i se met sur la pointe des pieds comme une danseuse pour traverser l’couloir. D’un coup j’me demande si ç’en est un.

*Un d’ces homos. ‘fin, on les appelle pu comme ça. Gay, c’est comme ça qu’les gens disent. Nom d’un chien ! C’est possible de s’éveiller gay un jour ? Sans doute que oui vu que Nevil a fait ça. Mais en même temps les gens i zarrivent à se prendre pour n’importe qui. J’me souviens de cette pauve fille, comment elle s’appelait déjà ? Phyllis qu’elle s’appelait, Phyllis Swan. Si j’me souviens bien ces enfoirés du gouvernement l’avaient séparée de sa smala pasqu’i trouvaient qu’elle était trop blanche par rapport aux autes. Trop blanche, mon cul. Après quand elle a grandi sa peau est devenue noire comme la suie. Ouais, un vrai bout d’charbon qu’elle estdevenue, noire comme un cul d’marmite. Ces enfoirés ont dit qu’elle était trop noire pour eux, fallait la renvoyer là d’où elle était venue. Donc elle est retournée dans son bled. Eux, i z’en voulaient pas. Les Blancs en voulaient pas non plus. Elle était coincée au milieu, quoi. La patate chaude.*

*Alors qu’esse qu’elle a fait ?*

*Oh yeah, she done tell everyone that she's not Phyllis Swan at all! Oowhhh noooo! She says she really the Queen a England! Conned herself good n proper. The mad thing was, white fellas treated the woman whit respect! Like she truly were the Queen! I swear to God every time I seed that woman she were gettin whiter every day!*

*White as friggin frost. Like she believed it so much that her skin was believin it too! Funny sorta turnout n all.*

*Maybe this somethin like Nevil goin through. Conned hisself good n proper like.*

*Hope he don't start thinkin that he be the friggin Queen! Jeeessuuss.*

*Now, how I'll tell me brother Booty? He won't like it! He'll kick Nev's arse for sure. Oh geez, what's a woman to do? It's all Davo's fault. Yep, pissin off on the boy just like that. No father to play football whit, play cricket whit, nothin. Spose a woman'll have to try n get Booty to have a yarn to him.*

*Me boy won't listen to me. Now where the friggin hell did he get a name like Jean Rhys? A white woman writer, geez, couldn't he a picked a black woman writer? Someone spectable like Oodgeroo? Bloody white woman me fat arse!*

*That's our Nev's problem, got his head stuck in all em books. Brainwashed. Them books have brainwashed him. Yeah, reckon that's bout the strength of it. Ain't no kid ever woked up whit headcrackin shit like this.*

*I let me thoughts go while I radar Nev's bedroom, lookin for any sign — any gay sign.*

*In the corner books sit stacked up on each other, some tattered and dog-eared, others brand-new.*

*Well, spose he does spend his money on other things part from piss n dope.*

*I kneel down and look closer at the cover pictures and titles. Yeah, some freaky*

*Eh ouais, elle a dit et redit à tout l'monde qu'elle s'appelait pas Phyllis Swan du tout ! Oooooh noooooôn ! Elle a dit qu'en fait c'était la reine d'Angleterre. Elle s'est bien monté la tête toute seule comme y faut. C'qui est dingue c'est que les Blancs la respectaient comme si elle était reine pour de vrai ! J'vous jure que chaque fois que j'la voyais elle était encore pluss blanche qu'avant. Blanche comme d'la neige, sans déconner. Comme si elle y croyait tellement fort que sa peau y a cru aussi ! Marrant hein, comme histoire. P'tête que c'est c'qui va se passer avec Nevil. P'tête qu'i s'est monté la tête tout seul comme y faut aussi. J'espère qu'i va pas se mette à se prendre pour la foutue reine d'Angleterre. Moooon dieu.*

*Bon, qu'esse que j'vais dire à mon frangin ? Booty, i va pas aimer, ça non ! I va lui botter l'cul à Nevil, c'est sûr. Qu'esse que j'vais faire, putain ? Tout ça c'est la faute à Davo. Foute le camp comme ça en laissant son gosse. Pas d'père pour jouer au foot, au cricket, rien. J'suppose qu'i faut que je demande à Booty de le discuter un peu. Mon ptit gars i m'écoute pas, moi. Et où il a trouvé un nom comme Jane Rhys, nom d'un chien ! Une écrivaine blanche, putain, i pouvait pas choisir une noire ? Quequ'un de respectabe, Oodgeroo par exempe ? Foutue blanche de mon cul !*

*Ça c'est son problème à Nev, c'est qu'il a tout l'temps la tête dans un bouquin. Ça lui a lavé l'cerveau, tous ces bouquins. Ouais, j'me dis qu'c'est sans doute ça la raison. Y'a jamais eu d'aute gosse qui s'est réveillé un matin avec des idées à la mords-moi-le-nœud comme ça.*

*J'laisse mes pensées vadrouiller en passant la chambre de Nev au radar pour chercher un signe — un signe de gay-itude. Dans un coin, y'a des bouquins empilés les uns sur les autres, y'en a qui sont déchirés, cornés, d'autres qui sont tout neufs. Bon, ben c'est qu'i doit quand même dépenser son argent dans aute chose que d'la pissette et d'la drogue.*

*J'me mets à genoux pour regarder les couvertures et les titres. Ouais, y'a des trucs*

*stuff here all right.* I look for anything that might have the name Jean R-h-y-s. Unstackin the books, I run me eyes over each one. There must be somethin here. Some clue.

Then I do notice somethin, five books by the same writer. *An Ideal Husband, Salome, The Importance of Being Earnest, Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance.* I take in the writer's name: Oscar Wilde. A playwright, the cover says. What the hell's a playwright?

I flick the cover open but there seems nothin outta place, nothin that would brainwash a man into thinkin hisself a woman. Just writin. Me eyes flick back to the other book, *A Woman Of No Importance.* *Now that sounds a bit suss. Maybe the boy don't think he important? A Woman Of No Importance? Hhhmmm.*

Sighin, I get up to me feet decidin I've had enough of this Nevil wantin to be a woman shit. *There's only one person who can talk some sense into the boy and I'll have to go and find him. Yep, can't have Nevil walkin down the main street in a dress. Geez.*

I walk past the bathroom. Nevil's voice sings out loud and deep. 'I am woman, hear me roar!'

'Bloody wake up to yerself, Nevil!' I yell as I open the front door and step out onto the street. *Watch me roar, Jeesus Christ! What's he now, a lion?*

'He woke up like that.' I look at Booty from across the kitchen table.

'Mave, men don't wake up bein poofers. Look at me, you don't see me wantin to wear women's clothes, eh?' He sips his beer.

'I'm tellin ya, Booty, he wasn't like that yesterday. He wake up like that! Sorta like... um, whatever it is, just stayed hidin in him n jumped out this morning,' I say, flappin me arms out to prove me point.

*bien bizarres là-dedans.* Je cherche queque chose où y'a écrit Jane Rhys dessus. J'prends les livres un par un et je zieute chacun. Y'a forcément un truc. Un indice.

Et pis je remarque queque chose: cinq livres avec le même auteur. *Un mari idéal, Salomé, L'importance d'être Constant, L'Éventail de Lady Windermere, Une Femme sans importance.* Je regarde le nom de l'auteur : Oscar Wilde. Un dramaturge, ça dit sur la couverture. *Qu'esse que c'est que ça, un dramaturge, nom de nom ?*

J'ouve le bouquin mais y'a rien de pas normal, rien qui ferait laver le cerveau d'un gars pour qu'i se prenne pour une femme. Juste des mots. J'porte mon regard sur l'aute bouquin, *Une Femme sans importance.* *Ça, ça a l'air un peu suspi. P'tête que mon ptit gars s'dit qu'il est pas important ? Une Femme sans importance ? Hhhmmm...*

J'soupire et j'me lève après avoir décidé que j'en ai marre de ces conneries de Nevil qui veut être une fille. *Y'a qu'une personne qui peut réussir à lui remettre la tête à l'endroit et faut que j'aïlle le chercher. Y'a pas moyen que j'laisse Nevil se balader dans l'centre-ville en robe. Bordel.*

J'passe à côté d'la salle de bain et j'entends la voix grave de Nevil qui chante bien fort: "I am woman, hear me roar !"<sup>1</sup>

— Putain mais réveille-toi, Nevil ! j'lui crie en même temps que j'ouve la porte pour sortir de la maison. *Hear me roar, nom d'un chien ! I se prend pour un lion matenant ?*

— I s'est réveillé comme ça.

J'regarde Booty de l'aute côté de la tabe en face de moi.

— Mave, les hommes ça s'éveille pas pédé. Regarde-moi, j'ai pas envie d'mette des fringues de femme, nan ?

I sirote sa bière.

— Mais j'te dis, Booty, il était pas comme ça hier ! I s'est réveillé comme ça. Un peu comme si, euh... le truc, je sais pas quoi, c'est resté caché à l'intérieur de lui et pis c'est sorti d'un coup c'matin, je dis, en faisant un grand geste de bras pour expliquer mieux.

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<sup>1</sup> Lyrics from the song "I am woman" by Helen Reddy (1971).

‘Jumped out, my black arse. He was always like that, Mave, you jus never saw it is all. Women’s clothes, Jesus!’ Booty shakes his head, disgust washin over his fat face.

‘Yeah, what bout Gracie, eh? Tell me that?’

‘A cover. He’s just using her as a cover. Ya hear bout all these movie stars n such, tellin the world they’re queer. “Comin outta the closet”, they call it. Yep, I seen all that sorta shit on Ricki Lake. Women wantin to be men and men wantin to be girls. Yeah, Mave, the boy’s been watchin too much a that American shit on TV. Seems to a man that kids don’t know who they are. They all wussies I reckon. Black wantin to be white; white wantin to be black. That’s where all these ideas come from — TV. Like he shamed a who he is or somethin.’

‘Booty, he don’t hardly watch TV. Nope, all he does is read them books a his. It’s them books puttin ideas into his head. Brainwashin him, Booty.’ I slump me shoulders wearily.

‘Well, what can a man do, eh? He won’t listen to his ol uncle here,’ Booty gets up from his chair and walks over to the window, shrugging his broad shoulders.

‘Yeah, but it’s not only that. He thinks he’s a writer! A white woman writer. Thinks his name is Rhys!’

‘What the ...?’ Booty croaks, swinging round on his heels, mouth agape, a stunned look on his dial.

‘Jean Rhys. J-e-a-n R-h-y-s. That’s his new name, so he reckons. She sposed to be a writer. Can’t say I heard a the woman. Don’t read books meself. Must go n ask Lizzy at the library there. She’d know bout this woman, I betcha.’

I watch Booty’s face turn a faint shade of grey, the veins stickin out on his thick neck. ‘What the hell’s wrong with that boy! Jean Rhys, eh. He needs a good throttlin, that’s what he needs. And I’m just the man to do it! Ain’t no bloody nephew a mine gonna go

— Sorti, ouais, mon cul de noir. Ça fait longtemps qu’il est comme ça mais t’avais juste pas vu avant, Mave, c’est tout. Des fringues de femme, putain !

Booty secoue sa grosse tête, dégoûté.

— Ouais, et Gracie alors ? Esplique-moi ça.

— Une couverture. Il l’utilise comme couverture. I font tous ça les stars de ciné là, de dire aux gens qu’i sont homo. “Sortir du placard” qu’i disent. Ouep, j’ai déjà vu ce genre de conneries dans l’émission d’Ricki Lake. Des filles qui veulent devenir des mecs et des mecs qui veulent devenir des filles. Ouais, le ptit a trop regardé des merdes américaines à la télé. Moi j’ai l’impression qu’les jeunes i savent pu qui i sont. Tous des baltringues, à mon avis. Des Noirs qui veulent être blancs, des Blancs qui veulent être noirs; tout ça, ça vient d’la télé. Comme si qu’il avait honte de lui-même ou queque chose.

— Booty, i regarde presque jamais la télé. Tout c’qu’i fait c’est lire des bouquins. C’est ses bouquins qui lui mettent des idées dans le crâne. Ça lui retourne le cerveau, Booty.

Je m’avachis, fatiguée.

— Et qu’esse tu veux que je fasse, hein ? I va pas écouter son vieux zoncle.

Booty se lève, va à la fenêtre et hausse ses larges épaules.

— Mais y’a pas qu’ça ! I pense qu’il est écrivain ! Enfin, écrivaine, pis blanche. I dit qu’i s’appelle Rhys !

— Hein ? Booty croasse en s’retournant d’un coup, la bouche grande ouverte, avec un air ahuri sur sa bobine.

— Jane Rhys. J-a-n-e R-h-y-s. I pense que c’est son nouveau nom. Censée être une écrivaine. J’peux pas dire que j’la connais. Moi-même je lis pas de bouquins. Faut que j’aille demander à Lizzy d’la bibiothèque, j’parie qu’elle la connaît, elle.

J’vois le visage de Booty devenir grisouille et les veines ressortir de son coup de taureau.

— Mais qu’esse qui va pas chez c’gamin ! Jane Rhys, hein. C’qui lui faut c’est une bonne baffe. Et j’suis le mieux placé pour le faire !

dancin round the town callin hisself a woman!”

Booty busts his guts, pullin out a chair with such force that the can a beer topples to the floor.

‘Righto, don’t go givin yerself a heart condition, Brother. All I’m askin is for you to have a good talk to him. I blame it on Davo. The way he upped and pissed off on us. That’s half the trouble, I betcha,’ I say, feelin me heart start to gallop as the memory of Davo comes back. *Davo, friggin scourin off like that. No wonder Nev don’t know hisself.*

‘Bullshit! Never worried him all these years. Why would it worry him now? Nah, the boy’s got a screw loose upstairs. Only thing you can do is get him to Doctor Chin. Take a good look at that head a his. I heard a people doin some sicko things — but this! Well, this really is somethin. Bad, fuckin bad business.’

Booty gives me a serious, this-is-gone-too-far look.

‘Maybe yer right. Can you come over n talk to him first? See, I’m thinkin he’ll listen to you.’

‘Righto, Mave. Gotta stop him from gettin outside in that friggin frock. Imagine his mates n the others, specially the footie team! They’d tear him to pieces for sure! You know what this town’s like, Mave. They’d pick him to death.’

Booty gets to his feet.

‘Ready?’

‘Yeah. But I’ll warn ya, it’s not a pretty sight. When I left him he was singin in the bathroom bout bein a woman n roarin.’ I shake me head, me own words seem unreal to me own ears.

Booty strides out in front of me. Each step he takes drives into the footpath. His shoulders hunch forward as though he’s ready to tackle somebody, ready to put em into the ground.

C’est pas mon neveu qui va aller dansotter en ville en se croyant pour une femme !

Booty pète une durite et attrape une chaise avec tellement d’force que sa canette de bière se casse la figure par terre.

— ‘Tention, tu vas t’choper une crise cardiaque, frérot. Tout c’que je te demande c’est de lui parler. C’est la faute à Davo, comment i s’est barré en nous laissant tomber. J’té parie que c’est à cause de ça, je dis avec mon cœur qui commence à tambouriner quand j’mé remets à penser à Davo. *Davo qui s’est tiré comme ça, pas étonnant que Nev save pas qui il est.*

— N’importe quoi ! Depuis l’temps, ça l’a pas dérangé. Pourquoi ça l’dérangerait matenant, hein ? Nan, i lui manque une case là-haut. Tout c’que tu peux faire c’est de l’amener au docteur Chin. Qu’i lui regarde bien dans son crâne. J’avais déjà entendu parler d’gens qui font des trucs de cinglé, mais ça ! Ah ça c’est queque chose. Une foutue sale histoire.

Booty me regarde l’air grave, l’air de dire que tout ça va trop loin.

— P’tête que t’as raison. Tu peux venir lui parler d’abord? Moi, je pense qu’i t’écouterà.

— Ça marche, Mave. Faut l’empêcher d’sortir dans cette putain d’robe. T’imagines qu’esse qu’i vont dire ses copains, et les autes ! Surtout ceux du foot ! I vont lui refaire le portrait, c’est sûr ! Tu sais bien comment i sont les gens dans cette ville, Mave. I vont l’cogner jusqu’à la mort.

Booty se lève.

— Prête ?

— Ouais. Mais j’té préviens, c’est pas joli à voir. Quand j’suis partie il était dans la salle de bain à chanter une chanson qui parlait d’ête une femme et de rugir.

J’secoue la tête: mes propres paroles m’paraissent complètement loufoques.

Booty fait des grands pas devant moi. Chaque pas qu’i fait laisse une trace dans la poussière du trottoir. I carre ses épaules en avant comme s’i se prépare à plaquer quelqu’un au sol et à l’enfoncer dedans.

Nevil sits on the edge of his bed, a book in one hand, a beer in the other. A joint hangin outta his slack gob. The room smells like it's full a horseshit; Mary Jane floatin out the window.

'Nev, Uncle's here to see ya.' I notice the way his legs are crossed over each other like one of em Buddah people. He ignores me. 'Nev love, lovey, Uncle Booty's waitin in the kitchen for ya.'

'What? Who?'" He asks, bringin his head up to gaze at me with bloodshot eyes.

'Uncle. He's here right now.'

'Why?'

He takes a drag.

'To talk. Um... he was just goin by, wanted to see ya is all,' I take a step into the room.

'Is this about Jean, eh? Cos if it is then I'm not talking to anyone,' he answers.

'Jean? Who's Jean?' I try.

'Don't start this again, Mother. You know very well who Jean is.' A touch of anger to his voice.

'Oh yeah, I forgot.'

I give him a sour I've-had-enough-of-you look.

'Nevil, what is that on your face?' I peer at him.

'Nothing much.'

He reaches over and stubs out the smoke.

'Make-up? Nevil Dooley, is that woman paint on that face a yours!' I walk right into the room.

'So? And don't call me Nevil!' He's all pissed off n riled like.

'It's make-up! Where the hell did you get that!' I slit me eyes at him. *Face paint. Clown colourin.*

'Oh, somewhere.'

He takes a sip of beer.

'Nevil Dooley! What the hell's goin on here, Sonny Jim!'

Nevil est assis au bord de son lit, un livre dans la main, une bière dans l'aute. Un joint pendouille à sa lippe flasque. La chambre sent l'fumier, la fumée d'Marie Jeanne s'envole par la fenêtre.

— Nev, ton oncle veut te voir.

J'note comment ses jambes sont croisées l'une sur l'aute comme les Bouddhas. Il m'ignore.

— Nev, poussin, chéri, Tonton Booty t'attend dans la cuisine.

— Quoi ? Qui ? i demande, en levant ses yeux rougis vers moi.

— Ton oncle. Il est là.

— Pourquoi ?

I tire une taffe.

— Pour te parler. Il, euh... i passait par là, pour te voir, c'est tout.

J'fais un pas à l'intérieur de la chambre.

— C'est à propos de Jane, c'est ça ? Parce que si c'est ça, je ne veux parler à personne, i répond.

— Jane ? C'est qui Jane ? je tente.

— Ne recommence pas avec ça, *Maman*. Tu sais très bien qui est Jane.

Un poil de colère dans sa voix.

— Ah, ouais, j'avais oublié.

J'lui jette un regard aigri de j'en-ai-ma-claque-de-ton-cirque.

— Nevil, c'est quoi que t'as sur le visage ? je dis en le scrutant.

— Pas grand-chose.

I se penche pour écraser son mégot fumant.

— Du *maquillage* ? Nevil Dooley, c'est du fard de fille que t'as sur la figure ?!

J'rente pour de bon dans la chambre.

— Et alors ? Et arrête de m'appeler Nevil ! Il est tout énervé et vexé, presque.

— C'est du maquillage ! Oûesque t'as trouvé ça, nom de dieu ! j'le regarde en plissant les yeux.

*D'la peinture. D'la peinture de clown.*

— Oh, quelque part.

I prend une gorgée d'bière.

— Nevil Dooley ! Qu'esse qui se passe ici, mon ptit gars ?

I tum to the doorway. Booty blocks the exit with his large frame, his hands on his hips as he glares in at Nevil.

‘Hello, Uncle. I ain’t doing nothing.’  
Nevil gives him a wide, yarndi grin.

‘Son, what the fuck is that on ya face?’  
Booty strides into the room, gut swingin from side to side, eyes narrowed and mouth twisted.  
*He gonna take a hunk a flesh.*

‘Lipstick, eyeshadow, eyeliner.  
Reckon it looks okay?’

Nevil uncurls his legs, arches his eyebrows, puckers his mouth.

‘Look here, son, you can’t go gettin bout like that! What are ya, a fuckin woman!’

Booty tightens his mouth, a small quiver shaking his frame.

‘My business. I’m not hurting anyone, am I?’ Nevil reaches down by the bed and picks up a small floral-print bag.

‘You got this shit from TV, didn’t ya? Watchin too much American sicko shit, eh? Ricki Lake, is that it?’ Booty yells, his fat arms choppin the air.

‘Nope. I’m Jean Rhys, in case Mother hasn’t already told you.’ Nevil pulls out a tube of lipstick.

‘Seductive Pink’ is written large and posh like on the side a it.

‘Shit. Bullshit! You a poofter now, son?’ Booty walks to the edge of the bed, shoulders hunched, ready to fly.

‘Don’t be stupid. What’s wrong with people in this house? It’s as though a girl’s committed some heinous offence, like murdered someone or something.’

Nevil puckers up his mouth an smears lipstick cross his tyre-tread lips.

‘That’s it! That’s it!’ Booty explodes; sweat poppin out on his forehead, his veins

J’m tourne vers la porte. Booty bloque la sortie avec sa grande carcasse, mains sur les hanches, un regard noir pour Nevil.

— Salut, Tonton. J’ai rien fait.

Nevil lui fait un grand sourire embrumé par la yarndi.

— Gamin, c’est quoi cette merde sur ton visage ?

Booty ente dans la chambre à grands pas, avec son bide qui s’balance à droite à gauche, ses yeux plissés et sa bouche tordue. *I va le morde.*

— Du rouge à lèvres, du fard à paupières, de l’eyeliner. Tu trouves ça joli ?

Nevil décroise ses jambes, hausse les sourcils, fait la moue.

— Écoute, fiston, tu peux pas te balader comme ça ! T’es quoi, une foutue gonzesse !

Booty serre les mâchoires et un ptit tremblement lui traverse la carcasse.

— C’est mes oignons. Je ne fais de mal à personne, si ?

Nevil se baisse et attrape un ptit sac à fleurs au pied du lit.

— T’as vu ça à la télé, hein ? Tu regardes trop d’merdes américaines ! Ricki Lake, c’est ça ? Booty braille en brassant l’air avec ses gros bras grassouillets.

— Non. Je m’appelle Jane Rhys, au cas où Maman ne te l’ait pas déjà dit.

Nevil sort un tube de rouge à lèvres. Y’a écrit ‘Rose Séduction’ en grosses lettres snob dessus.

— Bordel de merde. N’importe quoi ! T’es devenu une fiotte, gamin ?

Booty s’approche du bord du lit, les épaules tendues, prêt à exploser.

— Ne sois pas bête. Qu’est-ce qui vous prend dans cette maison ? On dirait que vous me prenez pour une criminelle, comme si j’avais tué quelqu’un ou quelque chose comme ça.

Nevil fait un cul-de-poule avec sa bouche et étale du rouge sur ses lèvres striées comme des pneus.

— C’est bon ! Y’en a marre ! Booty explose ; des gouttes de sueur apparaissent sur son front, ses veines ressortent tellement sur

stickin up like they ready to jump outta the man's arms as he grabs Nevil by the singlet.

'Fucken ratbag! What's got into ya? Causin ya mother all this grief! Now get into that bathroom an take that shit off ya face!'

Booty shakes a crunched fist in Nevil's face.

'Leave me alone, leave me alone,' Nevil bawlbaby.

'Now you cut this crap out, son. And lay off the fuckin drugs too. Your heads fucked enough already.'

Booty pulls Nevil up to his wonky feet.

'Listen to your uncle, Nev, he knows best,' I say softly.

'Yeah, yeah. Let go of me, Uncle,' whisperin weak, Nevil looks up into Booty's angry sweat slicked dial.

'Fucken no more a this shit, Nevil! Ya gotta pull that head a yours in, right?'

'Hmm, yeah, spouse,'

But Nevil's voice don't sound like he means it.

'Anyway, I gotta go to the dole office. So you can leave now, I gotta get dressed.'

'Now, sonny, if ya wanna have a man talk or somethin, come over ta me.' Booty pauses for a minute then says, 'But if ya gonna be keepin on at this shit, then a man's gonna have to settle ya down, n pretty fucken soon.'

He wrinkles his brow, his bottom lip twitchin.

'Yeah, yeah, okay Uncle.'

'Right then, that's that. How bout a cup a tea, Mave?' Booty asks over his shoulder as he leaves the room.

'Righto.' I look behind me. *That'll sort him over. That was all the boy needed, a good yarnin to.*

ses bras qu'on dirait qu'elles vont carrément sortir, et il empoigne Nevil par son t-shirt.

— Putain de ptit merdeux ! Qu'esse qui t'prend de faire tout ce chagrin à ta mère ! Matenant tu vas dans la salle de bain et t'enlèves toute cette merde de ta tête !

Booty agite son poing devant le visage de Nevil.

— Laisse-moi tranquille, lâche-moi, pleurniche Nevil.

— Alors t'arrêtes tes conneries, fiston. Et t'arrêtes la drogue aussi, putain. T'as déjà l'cerveau assez défoncé comme ça.

Booty relève Nevil, qui tient moyen bien sur ses pieds.

— Écoute ton oncle, Nev, il a raison, je dis doucement.

— Ouais, ouais. Lâche-moi, Tonton, Nev murmure tout bas, en regardant la face colère et luisante de sueur de Booty.

— T'arrêtes tes satanées conneries matenant Nevil ! Tu t'remets la tête à l'endroit, ok ?

— Hm, ouais, c'est bon...

Mais la voix de Nevil donne pas l'impression qu'il est sincère.

— De toute façon, je dois aller à l'agence pour l'emploi. Donc vous pouvez partir maintenant, il faut que je m'habille.

— Bon, fiston, si tu veux parler d'homme à homme ou queque chose, tu viens m'voir.

Booty fait une pause puis dit :

— Mais si tu continues tes foutaises, j'te préviens que je vais devoir te remettre à ta place et vite fait.

I fronce les sourcils, la lippe frémissante.

— Ouais, ouais, ok Tonton.

— Bon, eh ben voilà. Tu nous fais une tasse de thé, Mave ? Booty demande par-dessus son épaule en sortant d'la chambre.

— Ouep.

Je regarde derrière moi. Ça va l'calmer. C'est tout ce qu'il avait besoin, une bonne discute.



## Translating Coutechève Lavoie Aupont

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Part of the ascendant young generation of Haitian poets, these poems by Coutechève Lavoie Aupont appear in translation as part of a growing recognition of his work in both Haiti and the world. In 2016, he received the Prix René Philoctète and the Prix Dominique Batrville, the highest national awards for poetry in French and Kreyòl, respectively. He likewise stood as one of the youngest entrants featured in James Noël's landmark 2015 collection, *Anthologie de poésie haïtienne contemporaine*, published in Paris, drawing international recognition to the poet as part of a contemporary canon (Noël).

Lavoie Aupont's first book, *Partances*, from which these translations are taken, straddles the form of discrete poems assembled into a collection, and a single, sprawling, circling, long poem. The latter model has a well-established tradition in Haiti, as famously embodied in the "Spiralism" movement of Frankétienne and the aforementioned Philoctète (Munro 145-46), and in the poems of René Depestre. This style of writing reflected "errance" (Dash 758)—wandering directionless, with a hint of exile—which in turn translated both the perambulating attentions of the poets' gaze throughout their long poems and the displacement imposed on many writers of the Duvalier era. The sense of exile was particularly urgent during the dictatorship, which saw many literary figures forced out of Haiti, jailed, killed or disappeared at the hands of the repressive regime and its feared secret police. This newer work echoes, rhymes with, the aesthetic of *errance* — "*Partances*" (which I translate as *Taking Leave*) signals a spectral departure, one which is either about to happen, or which may never occur. This ambiguous relationship to *errance* is stated in the opening: "poet / i see myself stammering and aimless [*poète / je me vois bègue et errant*]" (77). The declared love of the Haitian capital, following a repeated formula of Street/City/Country is compared to "the way one reads worry /dashed on a postcard [*comme on lit l'inquiétude / sur une carte postale*]" (86). Such a perspective implies both an imagined distance and projected ambivalence. The poet cannot set aside the feelings, at times uneasiness, at times disgust. Nor can he separate himself from a city the poet insists he will never abandon, and which won't separate from him: "the city didn't want to leave, / so, tenderly, we spent the night / together [*la ville n'a pas voulu me quitter / et amoureusement nous avons passé la nuit / ensemble*]" (84).

This position has led one critic to evoke Baudelaire, casting the text as the "*Spleen de Port-au-Prince*" (Louis). And indeed, there are moments where the poet's contemplations slip into the realm of melancholy nostalgia: "my youth tiptoes no longer on the walls of this Street / of this City / of this Country [*ma jeunesse ne trotte plus sur les murs de cette Rue /de cette Ville /de ce Pays*]".

The blurring of borders between discrete poems belonging to a short collection, some of which bear their own dedications, and a single, meandering long poem, does not pose too much of a problem for a translator of the whole work, as the recurring motifs and call-backs can guide the interpretation of otherwise ambiguous moments in the text. Nor does the extremely sparse text employ large quantities of specifically Haitian terminology. Those which one does encounter (*loas, péristyle, madras, calebasse*) are generally rendered in their original, foreignized form. Instead, the greatest difficulty emerges from what is perhaps the poetry's most striking feature: its elliptical and liquid syntax. At times, predicates and subordinate clauses appear partially, progressively or wholly detached. In the lines "at night you are in the murmurings / the dew on your eyelids from fraying dawns [*le soir tu es dans la rumeur / la rosée sur tes paupières d'aubes fragilisées*]" (86), hedge between casting "dew" as a

complement for “murmurings” [*rosée/rumeur*] or a substitute, a revision in the speaker’s own speculations. The question is intensified when, after a line break, more images are listed, their syntactic relationship to the preceding lines even more tenuous. These dangling predicates—from a poet who dangles poems around the city “like public pendula” (110)—pose a substantial challenge to the translator.

Elsewhere in the text, single lines may be read as interjections, whispers, dialogue, but can be identified as such only by the subtlest of implications. Still more vexing for the translator are cases like “*plus de rêves*” (89). *Plus* in French can be either “more” or “no more” depending on context. I have opted for the latter, following patterns of elliptical negation elsewhere, like a “plus rien” which closes a long series of “plus de” constructions (79).

Where possible, however, I have tried to avoid adding a layer of intelligibility to a text replete with disjointed and impressionistic imagery. One can speculate, for example, about the startling appearance at the end of the sequence, “midnight /conjuring hour / when dogs howl their grievances / like an orange” (110). A slant homophony to *orage* [downpour], transfigured into one of the only occasional warm colours which burst from the otherwise predominant blue tones, perhaps? Whatever the case, the reader in translation should, insofar as possible, join French-language readers in the experience of disorientation. I am guided in this belief by recent scholarship on Caribbean translation which, following the work of Édouard Glissant, has emphasized the relational nature of translation, allowing the original’s opacity to assert a certain “right to untranslatability” (Forsdick 161). Such an “exchange fostered by translation” in turn makes it possible for both versions to be able to “retain their thickness and opacity” (Bermann 7).

I am also guided by the poetry itself, which stakes its own claim for maintaining a kind of “liquid” opacity. This is an urban landscape (or seascape), in which tides, fish, or sea salt are around every corner, where even dreams are waterlogged (92). The moments of ambiguity can take on their own tidal character, as an incomplete phrase can be cast less as a fragment, and more as one in an endless sequence of small waves lapping at the shore. Let me suggest then that perhaps the best model for both the source text and the translation is properly speaking colloidal. The colloidal is the liquid (or limpid) and opaque blended together, in such a way that both reflects and refracts, cloaks its meanings but not its light—not in the blue clarity of the sea but in what the poet calls “milk-blue,” *bleu au lait* (111).

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**Selected poems by Coutechève Lavoie Aupont**

ici j'invente la rupture des espérances  
j'imprime la rumeur du papier  
sur les formes à venir

ici j'apprends mal la vie

//

poète  
je me vois bègue et errant  
comme un homme qui sait prendre la route  
mais qui ne sait pas  
conjuguer ses pas collés sur les toits du silence

la stridence du temps est une boussole  
a-t-on aussi besoin de cela pour faire une Vie

la poésie est une vieille ruse fantôme  
enlevée à de faux sentiments jaunes  
des habitudes peu communes  
qu'on ne pardonnerait jamais à notre enfance

la poésie est un saignement de souvenirs bleus  
elle scie le quotidien flûte  
à chaque fois on redevient l'enfant qu'on a chassé

À grand brassées de spasmes  
et de rêves coqueluche

//

je t'aime face au soleil couchant – à bon entendeur  
[salut  
les yeux grands ouverts sur le monde  
comme si tu pouvais voir  
par cet amour les voyelles à l'épreuve du quotidien

au blanc de l'obscurité  
la beauté se reconstruit  
comme une fille à son treizième printemps

les doigts entrebâillés nous courons après les  
palpitations des autres

que peut-on avouer sur un paysage étranger

**Selected poems by Coutechève Lavoie Aupont**

**Translated by Charles Rice-Davis**

here I concoct dreams to be dashed  
and press rustling paper  
onto future forms

here I mis-learn life.

//

poet  
I see myself stammering and aimless  
like a man who knows the way there  
but can't lay down  
his sticky steps on silent roofs

time's clatter is a compass  
which we need to make a Life

poetry's a well-worn ghostly ruse  
ransomed to yellowing sentiments  
rarefied routines  
we were never permitted as children

poetry's a bloodletting of blue recollections  
it saws through the ordinary  
each time we become the child we chased after

With overloaded arms  
and whooping-cough dreams

//

I love you in the shadow of the setting sun  
–don't say you weren't told  
eyes wide onto the world  
as though your love could let you see  
the vowels braced against the day

in the white of darkness  
beauty is remade  
like a girl in her thirteenth spring

our fingers fanned out  
we chase others' palpitations

and what claims are made of distant landscapes

si son cœur est d'ici  
ta saveur est dans la terre  
la rame aussi pure qu'un parchemin durci par le sel  
[marin]

le soir tu es dans la rumeur  
la rosée sur tes paupières d'aubes fragilisées

le vent  
le tamtam des jupes solaires

oui l'odeur noire du grand large

à plus forte raison d'aimer  
l'amour est dans les yeux  
ou dans l'ombre touffue des passants

j'aime cette rue  
cette ville  
ce pays  
comme on lit l'inquiétude  
sur une carte postale

//

*pour la Ville  
et ceux qui n'ont pas su l'aimer*

plus de rêves  
et le désir n'est que vomissure sur papiers jaunes  
j'ai essuyé mes pas tissés dans le sable brûlant  
de cette île  
et trace l'adieu  
comme un arc-en-ciel d'ordures

je me réclame un corps à milles pattes  
et je dis mon cher soleil  
rien ne pourra réinventer la bouche de l'homme  
sur le Calvaire

le sang-sources ne coule plus dans ses veines  
[meurtris]

par la Cité dont la Citadelle et les arbres portent  
encore le nom comme une cicatrice dans l'œil

[gauche]  
la mémoire broute le destin des vies sidérales  
depuis que Sodome et Gomorrhe se réjouissent  
encore du Sel

l'oubli s'accroît et devient plus noble  
c'est toujours aux yeux de l'enfance  
que le vent broie le sable les jours des fêtes  
[populaires]

if the heart's from here  
your taste is in the earth  
in the oar as pure as parchment baked in sea salt

at night you are in the murmurings  
the dew on your eyelids from fraying dawns

wind  
tam-tam of solar skirts

yes the black aroma of endless expanse

all the more reason for loving  
love is in the eyes  
and the jumbled shadows of passers-by

I love this street  
this city  
this country  
the way one reads worry  
dashed on a postcard

//

*for the City  
and those who could never love it*

dreamless  
and desire is just vomit on yellowed pages  
I've dragged my crisscrossed steps on the hot sand  
of this island  
and it spells out farewell  
like a rotting rainbow

i demand a body with a thousand feet  
and say my cherished sun  
that nothing could remake the mouth of man  
on Calvary  
spring-blood flows no more in veins murdered

by the City whose Citadel and trees still  
bear his name like a scarred left eye

memory prunes the fate of astral lives  
since the days when Sodom and Gomorrah  
reveled in Salt  
oblivion swells and grows nobler  
the wind turns the days of neighbourhood games  
to sand in childhood eyes

d'ici la dérive est un vœu sur l'apothéose  
l'adieu seul est bien mis

adieu à cette ville qui défie les coraux  
cette ville où les enfants n'ont pas besoin de  
pour jouer à la marelle [songes]

adieu à cette ville  
où les femmes portent la douleur dans leurs madras  
et autour de la source si vient la calebasse.

//

adieu  
ma jeunesse ne trotte plus sur les murs de cette Rue  
de cette Ville  
de ce Pays  
où l'avenir est un pain au milieu de l'apocalypse

dans mon visage d'enfant soleil la vie lente  
insignifiante  
inerte  
doucement se brise  
tells les midis que les couverts n'ont pas sonnés

//

les enfants  
depuis quelque temps se taisent  
sur ma ville  
où j'ai suspendu des poèmes  
comme des pendules publiques  
pour qu'on y voie l'heure  
pour qu'on ne s'y trompe plus

les jours dans nos yeux s'ouvrent à reculons  
comme les fleurs molles de la nuit

minuit  
heure fétiche  
où les chiens se disputent les aboiements  
comme une orange

heure pure  
où les vieux songes basculent  
dans nos gestes de marées basses

to be adrift is a promise to the pinnacle  
the only thing in order is farewell

farewell to the city that defies the reefs  
this city where children have no need of dreams  
to play hopscotch

farewell to this city  
where the women keep pain under their madras  
or around the springs if the calebasse comes

//

farewell  
my youth tiptoes no longer on the walls of this  
of this City [Street  
of this Country  
where the future is bread at the centre of the  
[apocalypse]

in my sun-child's face this plodding life  
insignificant  
inert  
sweetly shatters  
the noontime hours of silent placesettings

//

children  
for some time now keep quiet  
about my city  
where I've hung poems  
like public pendula  
so all can see the time  
and be tricked no more

in our eyes days unfold backwards  
like flowers dewy from the night

midnight  
conjuring hour  
when dogs howl their grievances  
like an orange

uncorrupted hour  
when dreams tumble over  
in our low-tide expressions

tels regards perdus à l'envers de la vie

heure indécise  
où s'égare le poète

heure mouvante où le poème ne vit que pour lui  
[même  
et enfonce ses prunelles  
dans le mouvement des mots qui scie le silence

mon cœur  
depuis quelques temps se tait  
sur la ville

like side-eyed glances at life

waffling hour  
when the poet goes astray

shifting hour when the poem lives only for and by  
[itself  
and shoves its eyes  
into the movement of words which seal the silence

my heart  
for some time now keeps quiet  
about the city

## A Translation of Juan Cárdenas' *Diablo de las Provincias*

KIRSTY SIMPKINS

*El Diablo de las Provincias* is a 180-page novel written by the Colombian author Juan Cárdenas. It tells the tale of a biologist who reluctantly returns to his home country, Colombia, after an unsuccessful attempt at life abroad. He finds himself in a crucible of political, religious and industrial tensions. The novel was published by Spanish publishing house Periférica in 2017 as part of their *Largo Recorrido* series, which celebrates “clásicos recientes” [recent classics] and, in 2019, the novel was awarded the *Premio de Narrativa José María Arguedas* by Casa de las Américas.

The novel's setting is referred to as the “dwarf city” and the protagonist's name is never revealed. He is referred to as simply “the biologist”; other characters are also referenced by generic terms denoting their profession, relationship to the protagonist, or other defining features. “His mother,” “the drug dealer,” “the girl with the protruding belly”. This suggests that the events in the novel are representative of events that could occur in any place, to anyone. Similarly, the biologist finds his hometown has at once changed dramatically and not changed at all; there is a distinct feeling of being stuck in time. Cárdenas achieves this sense of timelessness through scarce reference to modern technology, and the town is described as “backwards”, and “conservative”. I have used lexis from across a spectrum of register to create a sense of not knowing when the novel is set; opting for phrases such as “affected form of address”, “rejoice” and “somewhat”, which appear slightly antiquated and formal in contrast with colloquial phrases such as “it all went to shit”.

The novel's subtitle “Fable in Miniatures” refers to its episodic format. The biologist is subject to conversations, encounters and events which are relayed in a straightforward manner, using subjective third-person narrative. However, the events are often unusual and imply a sense of unease. His brother's death, the birth of a child, an encounter with his drug-dealer, a reunion with his ex-girlfriend and a visit to his childhood home are all laced with a strange and uncomfortable undertone. The novel demands active participation from its reader, who must work to find meaning in these seemingly allegorical happenings. This is also because the narrator, the biologist, is characterised as a passive observer, at times unreliable, which is represented symbolically as he often witnesses events through a window, from behind a fence, inebriated, smoking a joint or in a dream. His experiences often leave him ruminating, confused and disturbed. Eventually, he rejects his own moral code and accepts a position to work for an industrial sugar cane plantation. Only then do things fall into place for him, and he can prosper in his hometown, representing the bleak reality conforming to corrupt systems is often the easier choice. This subverts the fable genre, which is expected to teach a moral lesson.

To communicate the biologist's passivity, the reflexive verb form is used frequently in the source text. In the translation, this is achieved by using the reflexive pronoun “himself”. For example, the phrase, “se vio arrastrado” [he saw himself dragged] is translated as “he found himself being dragged along”. To communicate the fact that he does not always see the full picture and to reinforce the sense of doubt, I have used lexis “somewhat”, “quite”, and “rather” to hedge the biologist's observations.

Considering its function, the source text can primarily be categorised as expressive due to its stylistic features and distinct narrative voice; it is “artistically organised” (Reiss 163). However,



the intertextuality, philosophical references and thought-provoking issues that are dealt with, prompt the reader to consider complex contemporary issues; for this reason, the text can also be categorised as operative. Thirdly, the novel also fulfils an informative function, as it provides information surrounding rural life and social structures in Colombia.

As Reiss states, “if the SL text is written in order to convey artistic contents, then the contents in the TL should be conveyed in an analogously artistic organisation” (167). Thus, the principal aim in my translation was to retain source text’s expressive features: particularly its intense imagery and figurative language. Where appropriate, I have used the same images in the target text with the aim of communicating similar connotations to the target reader; this can be seen in “sclerosis of their small city” and “like an old olive in vinegar”. These images are unusual and stylistic in the source text; in order to achieve a similar effect on the target reader as that of the original image on the source-text reader, they must be retained.

Where an image has not read fluently in the translation, I have adapted it accordingly. In chapter 3, the biologist, while smoking a joint, thinks back to memories of the life he left behind and envisions these memories as live images. “Podía ver cómo caía sobre el pasto húmedo el revoltijo de cosas todavía palpitantes y empapadas, recién molidas” [he could see how, on the humid grass, the mess of things still palpitating and drenched, recently ground-up, were falling] becomes, “he could see how tangled knots of palpitating images, raw and freshly ground together, began to fall upon the damp lawn”. Where “revoltijo” is euphonic in the source text, the English options “mess of stuff” or “jumble of things” sound clumsy. “Tangled knots” makes the implicit explicit as “revoltijo” has connotations of something being tangled or chaotic. Opting for “raw” instead of “drenched” is in keeping with the imagery of flesh that I interpreted upon my first reading of the source text; it also highlights a second denotation of “revoltijo”, as the term can also be used to refer to the intestines of a butchered animal. Semantically, “raw” works well alongside “ground together”, which results in an extended and idiomatic metaphor of flesh and meat. As slightly grotesque and uncomfortable images, they also mirror the overall atmosphere created throughout the whole of the source text.

A further challenge presented in the translation of this text was reference to the dialect typical of certain rural areas in Antioquia and El Valle del Cauca, where the novel is set. This dialect carries connotations of being from a rural, lower-class background and being less educated. The narration is as follows.

Así se habían hablado siempre, sin recurrir al melifluo tuteo con el que algunos paisanos intentaban disimular ante los demás el trato de vos, la sorna cómplice, las consonantes aspiradas, el dialecto machetero del sur que el biólogo, a pesar de los años de exilio voluntario, no había perdido del todo”. [They had talked that way always, without resorting to the mellifluous use of tú with which some people from that area tried to conceal in front of others their use of vos, the complicit sarcasm, the aspirated consonants, the sloppy dialect of the south which the biologist, in spite of his years in voluntary exile, had not lost completely].

The first challenge was the translation of “tú” [you] and “vos” [you]. Use of the latter, an antiquated form of address, is typically used in Cauca and the surrounding areas. It is said to have been preserved in these areas as they were historically self-sufficient, geographically difficult to reach and therefore less exposed to the use of “tú”, which had become more popular in Spain during the eighteenth century and spread to South America (Collazos 4). During this time, the use of “vos”

became more stigmatised, reserved for the ignorant and less gentrified. With no English equivalent, I opted for a general translation while aiming to communicate the social significance of this aspect of dialogue. This is achieved by translating “use of tú” as “the more affected form of address used by some townsfolk”. Use of the adjective “affected” suggests that the biologist’s dialect is seen as less desirable in comparison to the form of address adopted by others. Secondly, I translated “dialecto machetero del sur” as “typical southern accent”. “Machetero” in this context means “lazy” or “sloppy”, which could be demeaning to speakers of that dialect. “Typical” is a more neutral adjective that works well for the purposes of this translation. As Mona Baker suggests, how one chooses to “render the speech of a character in the source text... is potentially an ethical choice” (322).

The novel presents us with an uncomfortable narrator, some uncomfortable scenes and some uncomfortable truths. In this translation of the first three chapters, my aim has been to capture that discomfort and transmit the original text’s sense of unease.

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## El Diablo De Las Provincias

## Devil in The Province A Fable in Miniatures

Translated by Kirsty Simpkins

1

Cuando peor pintaban las cosas le salió el reemplazo en el internado de señoritas. La rectora del instituto de educación normal le explicó que la profesora titular tenía un permiso de maternidad y por eso lo habían buscado con cierta urgencia. Echó cuentas: pagaban mal, eran muchas horas, pero a esas alturas no tenía nada mejor. Estaba recién llegado, después de vivir quince años por fuera del país, y le habían bastado unas pocas semanas en el sofá de la casa de un amigo, en el centro de la capital, para darse cuenta de que sus títulos extranjeros no le garantizarían una plaza en ninguna universidad de primer nivel. Las personas como él, con las mismas o mejores credenciales, se habían vuelto una mercancía vulgar. Entonces resolvió que lo mejor sería rebajar las expectativas, probar suerte en la universidad departamental y pasar una temporada en la casa de su madre. Compró el tiquete de avión más barato que encontró y se despidió de su amigo, el único que le quedaba en la capital, uno de los pocos que le quedaban en el mundo. Se conocían desde la infancia, cuando ambos soñaban con escapar de la esclerosis de su pequeña ciudad imaginando países remotos. Su amigo le preguntó si de veras le parecía buena idea. Mirá que es una pesadilla, le dijo, pensátele bien. Aquí te podés quedar todo el tiempo que haga falta. El biólogo se encogió de hombros y sonrió para que el otro entendiera que la ciudad chica, el casipueblo, ese lugar conservador y atrasado del que tanto se burlaban para conjurar el estigma de haber nacido allí, finalmente se las había ingeniado para devolverles el chiste. Vuelvo con el rabo entre las piernas, dijo el biólogo, bufo y solemne, me entrego a mi destino, y su amigo se rio con su risa de animal asustado.

1

Just when things were looking really bleak, he got the temporary post at the girls' boarding school. The current teacher was going on maternity leave, the headmistress explained, so they needed him somewhat urgently. He weighed it up: the pay was poor and the hours were long, but at that point there were no better options on the table. He had arrived in the capital after fifteen years out of Colombia, and a few weeks on his friend's sofa in the city centre had been quite enough to convince him that his foreign qualifications wouldn't secure him a position in any top university. Nowadays, people with his credentials, or even better, weren't hard to come by. So, he thought he'd better lower his expectations, try his luck at the university back in his district and spend a stint at his mother's house. He bought the cheapest plane ticket he could find and said farewell to his friend, the only one he had left in the capital, one of the few he had left in the world. They had met as children, each of them plotting their grand escape from the sclerosis of their small city, conjuring up images of far-off lands. His friend asked him if he was sure it was a good idea. Listen, that place is unbearable, he said, think it over. You can stay here as long as you like. The biologist shrugged and smiled to show his friend that the tiny city, the almost-town, that backward and conservative place that they so often used to mock in order to exorcise the stigma of having been born there, had finally come up with a way to turn the joke on them. I'm going back with my tail between my legs, said the biologist, both solemn and satirical, I'm surrendering to fate, and his friend let out a laugh not unlike that of a frightened animal.

No quedaba de otra. Tocaba aprender a respirar por la herida y sonreír sin desprecio, incluso con cierta gratitud, celebrando que el sentido de humor provincial se hubiera revelado al mismo tiempo como una pequeña doctrina determinista. Cuidate mucho saludame a tu mamá, le dijo su amigo, con el acento de allá. Así se habían hablado siempre, sin recurrir al melifluo tuteo con el que algunos paisanos intentaban disimular ante los demás el trato de vos, la sorna cómplice, las consonantes aspiradas, el dialecto machetero del sur que el biólogo, a pesar de los años de exilio voluntario, no había perdido del todo.

A la semana de estar viviendo en la casa de su mamá lo llamaron del internado. Una voz histriónica le dijo que alguien de confianza les había pasado las señas y el biólogo se quedó pensando quién sería el inesperado benefactor. Le tuvieron que repetir dos veces toda la información, no tanto porque no hubiera escuchado sino porque no acababa de asimilar lo que sería su vida cotidiana, al menos por un tiempo: haría un reemplazo en las materias de biología y ecología en cuatro cursos de un internado para señoritas, a las afueras de la ciudad enana.

Un par de días después, mientras iba por la carretera en un destartado Mazda 323 y el sol de la mañana mostraba de a pocos la ondulación de los cafetales, el azul de la cordillera, se llenó de entusiasmo y tuvo por primera vez la impresión de que, después de todo, podría vivir allí de nuevo y acostumbrarse. Me adapto, pensó, sonriéndose por utilizar esa palabra. Pero casi de inmediato se puso a la defensiva: este paisaje es mentiroso como un diablo.

2

El colegio tenía tres edificios, uno muy grande de tres plantas con un patio de cemento, otro más pequeño donde estaban los dormitorios de

He had no choice. He must learn to grin and bear it, be grateful in fact, rejoice in the provincial sense of humour, which had just revealed itself as a minor deterministic doctrine. Look after yourself and say hello to your mum for me, said his friend, with his old familiar accent from back there. They'd always talked like that, not resorting to the more affected form of address used by some townsfolk to help them conceal their typical southern dialect, the complicit sarcasm and inhaled consonants, which the biologist, in spite of his years in voluntary exile, hadn't lost completely.

He'd been living at his mother's house for a week when he received the call from the boarding school. A histrionic voice informed him that a trustworthy source had passed on his details and the biologist was left wondering who the mysterious benefactor might be. They had to repeat the information twice, not so much because he wasn't listening but because he couldn't quite picture what daily life would now look like, at least for a while: he would be the substitute teacher for biology and ecology, giving four classes at a boarding school for girls, on the outskirts of the dwarf city.

A couple of days later, as he drove along the road in a beaten-up Mazda 323 and the morning sun began to shed light on the rolling hills of coffee plantations, in the cerulean haze of the mountain range, he was filled with enthusiasm and for the first time he got the feeling that perhaps, after all, he could live here again and get used to it. I can adapt, he thought, smiling to himself at his use of the word. But he caught himself almost immediately: this perfidious paradise is work of the devil.

2

The boarding school had three buildings, a large one with three floors and a cement patio, a smaller one where the girls' dormitories

las chicas y la capilla. Todo estaba pintado de un color azul verdoso que brillaba con la humedad permanente de ese paraje montañoso y templado. Mientras esperaba a la rectora en un corredor externo, el biólogo se quedó mirando un nicho con forma de concha marina que albergaba una figura de la Virgen. Era una estatua humilde, hecha de yeso, que no parecía despertar el fervor de nadie, abandonada a su suerte en medio de la pared, donde a duras penas cumplía con una dudosa tarea decorativa. El biólogo no tuvo tiempo de preguntarse por las razones de semejante desamparo porque en ese instante salió la rectora y le pidió que entrara a su despacho. A quemarropa le soltó lo de la baja de maternidad de la profesora titular. Es temporal, le advirtió. Tampoco dio muchas vueltas para hablarle del dinero y la carga horaria. Parecía una mujer resuelta, sin tiempo que perder, tanto así que el biólogo se vio arrastrado por su entusiasmo ejecutivo y dijo que sí a todo como si se estuviera incorporando a una empresa colonial o a una expedición científica.

Le asignaron una mesa en la sala de profesores. No la que le había correspondido como reemplazante de la maestra titular – esa se la había quedado una jovencita que dictaba matemáticas – sino una muy pequeña, frente a la ventana desde la cual se veían la cancha de básquet, un huerto y una alambrada que lindaba con un potrero donde pastaban unas vacas.

Los primeros días fueron apacibles, tal como había imaginado. Las alumnas se portaban muy bien, a pesar de que no mostraban mucho interés por lo que él trataba de enseñarles. Todas iban impecables, con su uniforme bien planchado y los peinados reglamentarios, que eran tres: el pelo suelto, la cola de caballo y cepillado hacia atrás, sujeto con una discreta diadema. De ningún modo podían llevarlo muy corto, pintado de colores, cardado, con rayitos ni nada que pudiera llamar la atención.

were, and a chapel. Everything was painted turquoise blue and glistened with the permanent humidity that lingered over that temperate, mountainous place, separating it from the rest of the world. As he waited for the headmistress in an outer corridor, the biologist studied a shell-shaped niche in the wall, which housed a figure of the Virgin Mary. It was a humble statue, made of plaster, unlikely to awaken religious fervour in anybody at all, left there in the middle of a wall, where she barely fulfilled her role as a dubious decoration. The biologist didn't have time to contemplate her state of neglect because, at that instant, the headmistress appeared and asked him to enter her office. She got straight to expressing her views on the unforeseen maternity leave. It's temporary, she warned. And she was upfront about both the salary and his overloaded timetable. She seemed like a resolute woman, without time to waste, so much so that the biologist found himself being dragged along by her executive enthusiasm, saying yes to everything as though he were joining a colonial corporation or scientific expedition.

He was assigned a desk in the staffroom. Not the one belonging to the usual biology teacher – a young mathematics teacher had taken that for herself – but a much smaller one, beside a window that overlooked a basketball court, an allotment and a wire fence surrounding a meadow where cows were grazing.

The first days were unremarkable, as he'd imagined. The girls were well behaved, despite showing scarce interest for anything he tried to teach them. They were all impeccable, with well-ironed uniforms and one of three regulation hair styles: down, ponytail, or brushed back with a discrete clip. By no means could they wear it short, dyed, backcombed or with highlights of any kind. Anything eye-catching was strictly prohibited.

Las alumnas provenían en su mayoría de los pueblos del sur del departamento, aunque había también algunas jovencitas negras de la Costa Pacífica, seguramente hijas de funcionarios públicos o de profesores de la región a los que se les concedían becas o tarifas reducidas. Las de la ciudad enana eran solo diez y la mitad estaban en embarazo.

Una de estas chicas, que mostraba una barriga puntuda bajo el suéter holgado del uniforme, lo interrumpió durante una clase en la que se hablaba sobre Darwin y la Teoría de la Evolución. Le preguntó si Dios había hecho que cada animal y cada planta tuvieran una tarea propia. Y el biólogo, incapaz de interpretar el repentino interés de la muchachita, pero igualmente emocionado por la posibilidad de enseñarle algo, se lanzó a explicar que no necesariamente, que así como había algunos rasgos desarrollados con un fin específico, también se presentaban muchos casos en los que la evolución parecía ir en contra de toda razón, de todo diseño. Digamos que la naturaleza no deja de inventar cosas, pero buena parte de lo que inventa es inútil durante milenios y no es raro que una adaptación se atrofie o, al revés, que cambie de utilidad. El aguacate es un ejemplo muy bonito. Las plantas empezaron a desarrollar ese fruto tan delicioso para que fuera consumido por unos grandes mamíferos llamados gomfoterios, muy parecidos a los elefantes, que vivían en los bosques de Centroamérica. Para casi cualquier animal contemporáneo habría sido imposible digerir un fruto con una pepa tan grande, pero no para los gomfoterios, que tenían un tracto digestivo enorme y así podían dispersar las semillas. Jugada maestra del aguacate, dirán ustedes, pero la cosa es que los gomfoterios se extinguieron hace poco menos de dos millones de años y entretanto los aguacates siguieron existiendo sin ninguna variación importante. Es como si los aguacates no se hubieran dado cuenta de que los gomfoterios dejaron de existir

Most of the students came from towns to the south of the district, although there were some black girls from the Pacific Coast, undoubtedly daughters of civil servants or local teachers, to whom they gave grants or reduced rates. Only ten pupils came from the dwarf city and half of them were pregnant.

One of the ten, whose belly protruded from underneath her oversized school jumper, interrupted him during a class about Darwin and the Theory of Evolution. She asked him if God had given each animal and plant its own role to play. And the biologist, incapable of processing the young lady's sudden interest, but equally excited by the opportunity to teach her something, launched into an explanation that no, not necessarily, that just as there were some characteristics developed for a specific purpose, there were also many cases in which evolution appeared to go against all reason, all conceivable design. Let's say that nature never stops creating things, but a good part of what it creates isn't useful for millennia, and it's not unusual for an adaptation to atrophy or, on the contrary, change purpose. How about the avocado. The avocado is a lovely example. Plants began to produce this delicious fruit for it to be eaten by large mammals called gomphotheres, very similar to elephants, that lived in the forests of Central America. At the time, it would have been impossible for any animal to digest a fruit with such a large seed, but not for the gomphothere, which had an enormous digestive tract and that's how avocados dispersed their seeds. A stroke of genius by the avocado, you might say, but the thing is that gomphotheres became extinct just less than two million years ago and, in the meantime, avocados have remained in existence without any significant variation. It's as though avocados didn't realise that gomphotheres had ceased to exist so many years before and they believed their evolutionary strategy was still working, when in reality everything changed without them

hace tanto tiempo y creyeran que su estrategia evolutiva todavía sirve, cuando lo cierto es que todo cambió y ellos no se dan por enterados, los aguacates viven su vida pendientes de una fantasma...

El biólogo paró en seco porque ahora la jovencita de la barriga puntuda lo miraba como se mira a los locos. Gracias por la pregunta, dijo, antes de seguir con la lección del libro de texto. En un momento se dio vuelta para escribir algo en la pizarra y oyó una vocecita jocosa que decía: ¿y entonces los aguacates de páramo eran para unos elefantes chiquitos? Hubo algunas risas, nada de qué preocuparse. La clase volvió a la normalidad y pudo terminar de dar la lección sin que nadie volviera a interrumpirlo.

El chascarrillo se refería a unos aguacates diminutos, del tamaño de una ciruela, que se dan silvestres en ecosistemas de alta montaña. Quizás la pregunta era relevante, pensó el biólogo, sonriendo para adentro. Sentado a su mesita de la sala de profesores, con la mirada perdida en la cancha de básquet vacía, fantaseó con encontrar los restos fosilizados de un elefantito del tamaño de una caja de zapatos.

### 3

Después del trabajo acompañó a su madre al supermercado. Llenaron de bolsas el baúl del Mazda y de regreso a casa hablaron de lo mucho que había crecido la ciudad enana, de la cantidad de edificios y conjuntos residenciales que se estaban construyendo, del evidente progreso que su madre veía demostrado matemáticamente en el hecho de que ahora había dos grandes centros comerciales, siempre repletos de clientes. Dos, repitió ella con los dedos en forma de antena, y van a hacer otro en la salida norte. Luego, señalando unas torres de apartamentos recién levantadas a un costado de la autopista, le aseguró a su hijo que las cosas habían mejorado mucho. Esto ya despegó, dijo y el biólogo asintió sin mucha

even noticing, avocados live their life in service of a ghost...

The biologist stopped short because the young lady with the protruding belly was looking at him as if he were mad. Thank you for the question, he said, before returning to the textbook lesson. A moment later he turned to write something on the board and heard a witty little voice say, and what about paramo avocados? Were they for a species of tiny, baby elephant? There was some laughter, nothing to cause concern. The class returned to normal and he was able to finish the lesson without further interruption.

The joke was referring to a type of minute avocado, the size of a plum, that grows wild in high mountain ecosystems. Maybe the question was relevant, the biologist thought, smiling to himself. Sat at his small desk in the staffroom, with his gaze lost in the empty basketball court, he fantasised about discovering the fossilised remains of an elephant the size of a shoebox.

### 3

After work, he went with his mother to the supermarket. They filled the Mazda with bags and on the way home they talked about just how much the dwarf city had grown, about the number of buildings and residential complexes that were being built, about the clear progress that his mother could see, mathematically shown in the fact that there were now two large shopping centres, always bursting with customers. Two, she repeated, forming antennae with her fingers, and they're going to build another one by the north exit. Then, pointing at some recently constructed tower blocks to one side of the motorway, she assured her son that things really had improved. It's really taken off, she said and the biologist

convicción, aunque secretamente reconocía la prosperidad de su madre. No por nada había conseguido mudarse a una urbanización de casas nuevas en una zona de gente acomodada, por los lados del Batallón, justo detrás de la pista del aeropuerto, donde por suerte no aterrizaban más que dos vuelos diarios y alguna avioneta de las que iban a la Costa Pacífica. Al biólogo le parecía que la casa nueva era incómoda en comparación con la antigua casa del centro. El diseño obedecía a la aplicación boba y maquinales de unas modas que se estaban propagando como una plaga por toda la ciudad. Y eso lo hizo pensar en el lugar común de que las formas tendían a replicarse en la naturaleza con igual desenfreno pero con mucho más acierto estético que en las obras humanas. El caso es que no había un solo espacio en toda la casa nueva que el biólogo encontrara acogedor, ningún nicho que propiciara cualquier actividad enriquecedora para el espíritu. La sala, las habitaciones, nada invitaba permanecer mucho tiempo, como si la casa estuviera compuesta exclusivamente por pasillos y escaleras y el biólogo no pudiera hacer otra cosa que deambular de un lado a otro, subir y bajar, entrar y salir, abrir y cerrar la puerta de la nevera, a veces acurrucarse delante de la televisión. Actividades puras, pensaba él, vaciadas de todo significado, que, por otro lado, eran una consecuencia más de su renovada condición de hijo. Algunas noches, cuando su mamá ya se había acostado, el biólogo salía al jardín a oler el fresco y fumarse un porro sentado en una mecedora vieja. Era el único momento de sosiego que tenía en esa casa, cuando algo dentro de él se iba desentumeciendo, y durante unos minutos, con el porro humeándole entre los dedos, podía ver cómo caía sobre el pasto húmedo el revoltijo de cosas todavía palpitantes y empapadas, recién molidas: la ciudad al otro lado del mundo, frases en los otros idiomas, las cortinas del apartamento diminuto donde había vivido los últimos dos años, después de divorciarse, el nauseabundo olor a especias y grasa de cordero

noded half-heartedly, though secretly he acknowledged his mother's prosperity. It wasn't by chance that she was now living amongst the affluent in one of those new houses near the Battalion, just behind the airport where, luckily, no more than two flights and the odd little plane from the Pacific Coast landed each day. The biologist found the new house uncomfortable in comparison to their old one in the centre. It was a typical example of the simplified, mechanical style of building that was spreading through the city like a plague. The thought prompted him to consider the commonplace way in which lifeforms tended to multiply in the natural world: just as prolifically, but with far greater aesthetic skill than that of any human workmanship. Honestly, there wasn't a single space in the entirety of the new house that the biologist found inviting, not one nook that might serve as a spot where he could partake in any sort of activity that might nourish his soul. The living room, the bedrooms, every room was loath to accommodate its guest. It was as though the house were made exclusively of corridors and stairs and the biologist was left no choice but to wander from one end of it to the other, climb up and down, come in and out, open and close the fridge door, sometimes curl up in front of the television. Pure activities, he thought, void of all meaning, activities which, on the other hand, were yet another consequence of his renewed condition as his mother's child. Some nights, when she had retired to bed, the biologist went out into the garden to enjoy the fresh air and smoke a joint, sitting in an old rocking chair. It was the only peaceful moment he had in that house, when something inside of him finally began to unwind and, for a few minutes, with the joint gently smoking between his fingers, he could see how the tangled knots of palpitating images, raw and freshly ground together, began to fall upon the damp lawn: the city on the other side of the world, phrases in other languages, the curtains in that tiny flat where he had lived for the past



que se metía por la ventana del patio interior y que había acabado por impregnarle toda la ropa, pedazos de memoria reciente que él trataba de procesar y estirar como si rellenara con desperdicios una especie de salchicha, deseoso pero a la vez atemorizado por la posibilidad de tropezar con algún objeto que diera consistencia y sentido al conjunto. Porque él sospechaba que en últimas la luz, la superficie suave con la que se le presentaba tal o cual recuerdo, la inminencia de un olor feliz que no llegaba, todo eso estaba secretamente recorrido por un orden, por una consigna que no acababa de formularse para él. Esa era mi vida, es todo lo que podía decir. Esa era mi vida y todo se jodió. Había una economía en esas cosas, incluso en la administración de las situaciones dolorosas, como el divorcio. Hasta el fracaso formaba parte de lo admisible. El fracaso laboral, el fracaso amoroso, cosas que no eran motivo de condena porque al final, con el debido entrenamiento, uno acababa superando el fracaso conservándose en el interior del fracaso, como hacen las aceitunas viejas en vinagre, dejando pasar el tiempo en la barra del bar, rumiando y desrumiando frases hechas junto a algún veterano de otro naufragio que, con suerte, le daría consejos sabios sobre cómo racionar el dinero del subsidio estatal, a media máquina, para seguir cultivando todos los vicios en medio de la pobreza. Por supuesto, él era consciente de que los desencadenantes habían sido externos, la cancelación del proyecto de investigación, los recortes en todos los programas científicos. El resto había consistido en dejarse caer cuesta abajo, arrastrado por la mera inercia del golpe. Pero el biólogo estaba convencido de que en la caída posterior, en ese desbarrancadero lento y rutinario que vino después, se escondía un secreto sobre él mismo, sobre su conformación más íntima, algo que en últimas le confería una identidad y hasta un estilo. Yo soy esa forma de caer, pensaba, volviendo a darle la calada final al porro. Yo soy básicamente ese modo de dejarse ir. Luego disparaba con dos dedos la

two years, following his divorce, the sickening smell of herbs and lamb fat that seeped in through the patio window of the inner courtyard and ended up impregnating all of his clothes, chunks of recent memory that he tried to process and stretch as though filling a type of sausage with scraps, longing for, but also terrified by, the possibility of stumbling upon an object that might give some consistency and meaning to it all. Because, deep down, he suspected that the light, the polished form in which his memories were resurfacing, the proximate scent of ever absent happiness, all of that was secretly run by an order, by a set of rules that didn't quite add up for him.. That was my life, is all he could say. That was my life and it all went to shit. There was economy in those sorts of things, even in managing painful situations like divorce.. Even failure formed part of the permissible. Failure at work, failure in love: such failures weren't to be punished because, in the end, with enough practice, you can overcome failure by preserving yourself within it, like an old olive in vinegar, watching time pass while sat at a bar, chewing over old adages and spitting them out alongside some other shipwrecked veteran who, if you're lucky, offers wise advice on how to ration your state benefits, stringently, in order to feed all your habits in spite of poverty. Of course, he knew that it was down to external forces, the cancellation of his research project, cuts to all the scientific programmes. The rest had consisted in him allowing himself to fall further downhill, dragged down by the sheer inertia of his setback. But the biologist was convinced that there, on that slow and stagnant precipice that followed his last fall, a deep secret about himself was hiding, something that would ultimately define him and maybe even refine him. I epitomise the fall, he thought, returning for one last puff on his joint. I practically *am* the slow decline. Then, with two fingers he shot at the final smoking ember, the tiny glimmer of ash that would have died out quietly on the damp lawn, shrouded by the

última pata del bicho humeante, casi una pizca de cenizas que iba a morir sin quejas en el pasto húmedo, arropada por el canto de mil ranitas. Entonces recobraba poco a poco la conciencia del lugar en el que se hallaba, de vuelta en la ciudad enana, de este lado del mundo, en la casa de su madre y se sentía culposo por saber que ella estaba siendo tan generosa y tan comprensiva. Al punto de no exteriorizar ningún gesto de reproche, nada que pudiera hacer evidente lo que él sabía que su madre pensaba en el fondo: que, de sus dos hijos, el mayor era el peor preparado para enfrentarse al mundo. Y que era una lástima que la vida hubiera mostrado su cara más cruel. Porque, siendo totalmente francos, ella habría preferido que el elegido para una muerte prematura fuera el biólogo y no el hijo menor, que era la verdadera dulzura de su alma, la luz de sus días, el amor fantasma, el aguacate primordial del padre ausente. Porque así lo había dispuesto ella y, sin embargo, la vida fue tan cruel, tan cruel, que torció todo lo que ella había planeado sin planear, todo lo que había dibujado en lo profundo del sueño más profundo, sobre el tablero de su corazón. Esto es: que el hijo mayor fuera el borrador y el hijo menor la versión definitiva. Pero la vida es cruel, muy cruel, decía ella cada vez que podía, la vida es dura y al mismo tiempo inestable, insensata, y la vez está regida por una geometría que no podemos conocer pero sí sentir en carne propia, y cuando uno elabora un plan, cuando uno proyecta una idea y diseña y forja y esculpe, la vida siempre se encarga de deformarlo todo, como si esa vida estuviera gobernada por demonios malignos, amantes del vericuetos y no de la línea recta, por sátiros caprichosos y no por Dios y que Dios me perdone pero a veces creo que Dios está en la muerte y no en la vida porque la muerte es el descanso eterno, la perpetua de la rectitud. En cambio, la vida, eso que llaman naturaleza, es obra del diablo, que se alía con las fieras, con las serpientes, con el alacrán. El diablo hace nido en el ojo del pájaro, en la cáscara pintada

song of a thousand frogs. Bit by bit, he began to regain consciousness of his surroundings, and he found himself once again in the dwarf city, on this side of the world, in his mother's house, and he felt guilty in the knowledge that she was being so generous and so understanding. So much so, that he held back any reproachful gesture, anything that might reveal his awareness of what his mother thought deep down: that, of her two sons, the eldest was the least prepared to face the world. And what a shame that life had revealed its cruellest side. Because, being completely honest, she would have preferred for the biologist to die a premature death and not the younger son, who was the true apple of her eye, the light of her life, the loving phantom, the primordial avocado of their absent father. Because that's how she herself had framed it, and yet, life was so cruel, so cruel, that it twisted everything she had planned without planning it, everything she'd drawn up in the depths of her deepest dreams, on the canvas of her heart. Which is: that the younger son would outlive the eldest; that the older son would be the prototype and the younger would be the finished product. But, life is cruel, so cruel, she said whenever she had the chance, life is hard and at the same time unstable, senseless and at the same time governed by a geometry that we can't come to understand but, yes, we can feel it in our own flesh, and when we devise a plan, project an idea and design and forge and sculpt, life always finds a way to unravel it all, as though this life were governed by malign demons, smoke and mirror tricksters who make mazes out of straight lines, sent by devilish satyrs and not by God, and Lord forgive me but sometimes I think God is in death and not in life because it's death that brings us eternal peace, the perpetual light of rectitude. Life, on the other hand, so-called nature, is work of the devil, who formed an alliance with the beasts, with the serpents, with the scorpion. The devil makes his nest in the eye of the bird, in the painted shell of the egg,

del huevo, en la garra de la bestia, en el reguero    in the claw of the creature, in the perversions  
de plumas, en el remolino del río.                      of the queer, in the whirlpool of the river.

## Celui Qui Est Digne D'être Aimé (He Who is Worthy of Being Loved)

CHRISTOPHER DI PASQUALE

Abdellah Taïa's 2017 novel *Celui qui est digne d'être aimé* navigates the intersecting structures and identities associated with gender and sexuality, as refracted across national borders. Taïa embodies multiple identities himself: he is often introduced to English-speaking audiences as Morocco's first openly gay Francophone writer (Metz), having come out as gay to Moroccan magazine *Telquel* in 2007 (Brooks). Taïa notes that his work often draws from his lived experience both in Morocco and France and is aware, even as he avoids being "overly political", of how his work inhabits themes that relate to the "collective paranoia of a society that has not dealt with the issue of foreigners, racism, colonialism" (Inzerillo). As Edwy Plenel notes, anti-Muslim sentiment has been on the rise in France in the twenty-first century, replacing the Jew as go-to scapegoat in the European imagination (7) yet the function of the scapegoat is the same: the construction of a disloyal entity within the state — "opposed to the secular values championed by our country" (Plenel 9). In France today, a gay Muslim migrant from North Africa who writes in French like Taïa resists easy categorisation as oppressor or victim.

The protagonist of Taïa's epistolary novel Ahmed sits squarely between such binaries. In the French societal context where hostility to Muslims, migrants and LGBT people continues to be politically instrumentalized (Williamson, CFCM), works like *Celui qui est digne d'être aimé* — or 'He who is worthy of being loved', a translation from Arabic of the character Lahbib's name — problematise normative categories of identity, and question not only who is worthy of being loved but also belonging.

*Celui* is made up of four letters and here I chose to translate part of the first letter — Ahmed to his mother — and the last letter — Lahbib to Ahmed. In juxtaposition, these two letters demonstrate Taïa's problematisation of seemingly fixed categories: gender, sexuality and family. In particular, the formal, curt tone and register Ahmed employs when addressing his mother and talking about his family is contrasted by how Lahbib talks to Ahmed, with tenderness stemming from what Jocelyn Frelier terms their "chosen brotherhood" (610).

Taïa's *Celui* lends itself to being understood through the paradigm of 'cultural translation', a concept often associated with Homi Bhabha. Bhabha takes translation beyond transfer of text and meaning between languages: translation is negotiation, the "cutting edge", "the inbetween space — that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (56). Anthony Pym raises valid questions about Bhabha's cultural translation: the term 'translation' becomes vague and metaphoric (Pym 140-141). However, the concept of translation as one of cultural "hybridity" operating in a liminal "Third Space" (Bhabha 56), is useful in understanding *Celui*, particularly as a piece of cultural translation itself.

It is noteworthy that Taïa chooses to write *Celui* and all of his works in French. Taïa learned French at school "as a way out of Morocco" and for that reason was seen as a "traitor": the language is associated with both a colonising entity—the French state—and wealthy Moroccans (Brooks). Yet writing in French is a form of cultural translation that leaves the French language "inflected" with Taïa's experience. As William J Spurlin writes, queer Maghrebian authors like Taïa who choose French are "negotiating the felt experiences of dissonance between their indigenous culture and that of Europe in order to make sense of their sexual subjectivities as always already culturally mediated and configured within power relations" (106).

That *Celui* is cultural translation has implications for translation into English. Ironically, in order to preserve the act of cultural translation that Taïa embarks on, I chose to

stay as close to the source text as possible and operate within an equivalence paradigm. I use “equivalence” here as per Pym’s definitions, where “natural” equivalence assumes mutual equivalence between source and target text, while “directional” equivalence highlights one-way equivalence, where “an equivalent [term, phrase, expression etc.] is located on one side more than the other” (27). An example of directional equivalence is my choice to render “*sexe*” as “dick”. Back-translation would not lead directly back to “*sexe*”; however, the word “dick” still functions as an equivalent.

Ncube comments on the “economy” of Taïa’s language, his use of short, sharp sentences and fragments that at times resemble poetry, interspersed by longer sentences (479). This gives Taïa’s prose rhythm — another way he leaves his mark on French. By staying close to the source text, I used equivalents in English that transfer Taïa’s particular use of French. In some instances, an almost faithful rendering allows me to leave my own mark on English.

An example is the faithful rendering of Taïa’s staccato sentence structure and how it draws attention to the disruption Taïa seeks to effect on categories of gender within his work. Ahmed’s hostility to his mother Malika and her “cruelty” (Taïa 17) is bound up with her gender: from the moment his parents were married, Ahmed’s father is “condemned” to Malika, her “odours” and her “vagina” (3). Yet Ahmed’s misogynistic opinion is complicated by his own admission that his mother assumed the role of “dictator” (1) because she *had* to play the role of man, to make up for Ahmed’s father’s weakness. The reader learns that the job of building the family home was left to Malika and in the target text, the translation adheres to Taïa’s structure closely in order to emphasise Malika’s struggle as she assumed the opposing gender role. “I am the Hay Salam house, me, me... You hear? Him... Him, he thought only of one thing...” (3). The reader stumbles over this sentence structure of fragments punctuated by commas and ellipses, lingering over Malika’s words. The repetition of personal pronouns sets up a comparison between mother and father, and conveys a desperation that gives way to sympathy for Malika, who had to take care of the family’s affairs while her husband was occupied with smoking and fantasising about that “one thing”. Instead of smoothing the target text to conform to ease of reading in the target, I opted to maintain Taïa’s structure to mark the English with Malika’s struggle.

The questioning of gender roles mirrors the questioning of family roles, seen in comparing Ahmed’s letter with Lahbib’s. The reader learns that Ahmed and Lahbib are childhood friends, both gay and both raped by men in their neighbourhood. Ahmed the adult is “alone” (6) in France; yet Salé and Rabat are also hostile environments. Lack of belonging is a theme that Gibson Ncube remarks is a constant in Taïa’s works and in *Celui* where the characters dream of “the possible liberation they can have in France”; yet in France they “perpetually meditate on Morocco, which in spite of its intolerance of homosexuality will always remain their home” (1831). Lahbib tells Ahmed that though they are both “fags”, the pair are “united in spite of them”, the people around them. The two have a genuine companionship, Frelier’s “chosen brotherhood”, a version of the chosen family so prevalent among queer youth experience familial and societal rejection (Frelier 611).

To mark the difference between Ahmed’s biological family and his chosen family of Lahbib, I chose to maintain Lahbib’s term of address to Ahmed, “*mon petit frère*”, instead of ‘little brother’. While Lawrence Venuti’s argument for foreignizing texts (120) against translations that flatten out cultural differences is worthwhile, retaining source language terms purely because no direct equivalent can be found also risks alienating the reader. Maintaining the French *petit frère* performs a specific role beyond simple meaning transfer: it inflects the English with a trace of the mutual love between Lahbib and Ahmed. Compare this to how Ahmed refers to his brother Slimane in his letter to Malika: “your eldest son” (7). Not Ahmed’s brother but Malika’s son, creating distance. While *petit frère* risks incomprehension by the

English reader, it conveys here a brotherly love. Not only Lahbib but Ahmed too is worthy of love.

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## Celui qui est digne d'être aimé

AOÛT 2015

Chère Malika,

Là-bas, tout au fond du noir, le monde est beau enfin, n'est-ce pas ?

Ne réponds pas à cette question, s'il te plaît. Ne dis rien, plus rien. Reste où tu es, comme tu es, effrontée jusqu'au bout, les yeux durs, indifférente à tous, à moi surtout, dictatrice assumée. N'essaie même pas de comprendre ce qui se cache comme secrets dans ma question qui se veut intelligente. Continue de fermer les yeux. Tu es en paix. Dans le repos éternel. Restes-y. Ne bouge surtout pas. Tu es partie. Nous sommes seuls. Nous survivons, seuls. Nous construisons la vie après toi, en vain.

Chaque jour nous sommes un peu plus en colère. Chaque nuit est un combat d'avance perdu. Les cauchemars viennent et ne repartent plus.

Tu es morte en 2010. Et depuis, jamais tu n'as été aussi vivante. Après la mort du père, ce n'était pas ce que j'avais compris. La mort qui obsède ceux qui restent, ceux qui sont encore un petit peu là. Les morts sont vivants.

Il nous a quittés jeune, lui. Hamid. 66 ans à peine. Un vendredi matin. Le choc a été énorme : exister sans père. Un père qui fumait trois paquets de cigarettes par jour. Respirer, manger, marcher n'était plus pareil sans lui. Même espérer un jour aimer sincère n'était plus possible sans lui, cet homme défaillant, sans sa bienveillance, sa tendresse désespérée, son désir fougueux et ses éternelles maladroites. Dès qu'il a été enterré, tu as pris un peu plus le contrôle sur nous, sur tout chez nous. Sur le cœur de l'existence, l'origine de tout en nous : notre pauvre et minuscule maison à Hay Salam, à Salé.

Je me souviens de ce que tu as fait, ma mère. Je n'ai pas peur de te le rappeler.

## Celui qui est digne d'être aimé

Translated by Christopher Di Pasquale

AUGUST 2015

Dear Malika,

Down there, deep in the dark, the world is beautiful at last, isn't it?

Don't answer that question, please. Don't say anything, nothing more. Stay where you are, as you are, insolent to the end, hard-eyed, indifferent to all, to me especially, assumed dictator. Don't even try to understand the secrets hidden in my supposedly intelligent question. Keep your eyes closed. You're at peace. In eternal rest. Stay there.

Don't move. You left. We are alone. We're surviving, alone. We're building life after you, in vain.

Each day we get a little angrier. Every night is a fight already lost. Nightmares come and never leave.

You died in 2010. Yet ever since, you've never been so alive. I hadn't appreciated that when Father died. Death haunts those who remain, those who are still a little bit here. The dead are alive.

He left us young. Hamid. Barely 66 years old. On a Friday morning. The shock of existing without a father was enormous. A father who smoked three packs of cigarettes a day. Breathing, eating, walking was no longer the same without him. Even hoping to one day love sincerely was no longer possible without him, this faltering man, without his benevolence, desperate tenderness, fiery desire and eternal awkwardness. As soon as he was buried, you took a little more control over us, over everything in our house. At the heart of our existence, the origin of everything in us: our poor and tiny house in Hay Salam, Salé.

My mother, I remember what you did. I'm not afraid to remind you.



Le soir même de sa mort, tu as donné ses vêtements et ses affaires aux mendiants, aux ivrognes, aux méchants. Vite, vite, ne surtout pas garder de trace de lui chez nous. Son corps à peine mis en terre, et déjà ses souvenirs, ses objets, ses livres dispersés, éloignés. Évanouis. Il a existé, le père. Il n'existe plus. Voilà comment on va porter son deuil : sans aucune trace de lui, de sa maladie contagieuse. Vous avez entendu, les enfants ? Tu as entendu, toi, Ahmed ? Pleurez si vous voulez, mais ne me demandez pas de faire comme vous.

Tu as porté le blanc quarante jours, maman. Dans ton cœur, ce n'était pas le deuil, c'était le devoir, l'obligation. Rien de plus. Tu as joué à la veuve. Parfaitement. Bravo !

[...]

Je ne suis pourtant pas celui que tu as le plus aimé. Non. Ton fils aîné, Slimane, nous dépassait tous dans ton cœur. D'abord lui, puis nous. Le meilleur morceau de viande pour lui, les restes pour nous. Les prières ferventes, constantes, pour lui, presque rien pour nous.

Tu as tout adoré dans le corps de ton fils aîné. Tu l'as poussé fort, élevé haut. Tu as fait de lui un roi, un prophète qui n'avait nul besoin de parler : son message étant d'avance entendu, accepté, appliqué par nous tous. Devant ce grand frère, nous n'existons guère.

Tu as tout épargné, pardonné, à ce fils. Tu as même fermé les yeux quand tu as compris qu'il ne serait jamais réellement l'homme viril que tu voulais. Tu as continué à le favoriser, à le déifier. Tu avais espéré trouver ton salut comme femme grâce à lui. Encore plus de pouvoir. Mais cela ne s'est pas produit. Il t'a déçue. Nous le savions tous. Il n'a pas su suivre tes conseils, interpréter dans la réalité tes plans et tes ordres. Il s'est révélé craintif, terriblement timide devant les femmes. Il ne sait pas y faire avec les femmes. Il lui manque l'audace et la malignité nécessaires, il lui manque les gestes et l'inspiration. Tu lui as tout donné

On the very evening of his death, you gave his clothes and things to beggars, to drunks, to the wicked. Quickly, quickly and mostly so as not to keep a trace of him in our house. His body barely laid in the ground and his memories, his things, his books scattered and distant. Faded. Father existed. He doesn't exist anymore. This is how we're going to mourn him: without any trace of him, of his contagious disease. Did you hear, kids? Did you hear, Ahmed? Cry if you want, but don't ask me to do as you do.

Mum, you wore white for forty days. In your heart, you weren't despairing, it was duty, obligation. Nothing more. You played the widow. Perfectly. Bravo!

[...]

I'm not the one you loved the most. No. Your eldest son, Slimane, ranked highest in your heart. First him, then us. The best piece of meat for him, the leftovers for us. Fervent, constant prayers for him, almost nothing for us.

You loved everything in your eldest son's body. You pushed him hard, raised him high. You made him a king, a prophet who had no need to speak: his message being heard in advance, accepted, applied by all of us. Before this big brother, we hardly exist.

You spared this son everything. You forgave him. You even closed your eyes when you realised that he would never really be the manly man you wanted. You kept favouring him, deifying him. You had hoped to find your salvation as a woman through him. Even more power. But this did not happen. He let you down. We all knew that. He did not know how to follow your advice, to put into practice your plans and orders. He turned out to be fearful, terribly shy in front of women. He doesn't know how to deal with women. He lacks the necessary audacity and craftiness, he lacks the moves and inspiration. You gave him everything but this. So he became that thing that he still

sauf ça. Alors il est devenu cette chose qu'il est encore aujourd'hui. Soumis à une autre femme que toi.

Tu n'es plus là pour le guider, sécher ses larmes, économiser de l'argent pour lui, au cas où. Tu n'es plus sa maîtresse, son mentor. Une autre femme a pris ta place. Sur lui, sur son corps, cette femme se venge de tout ce que le Maroc réserve comme sort cruel aux femmes. Slimane paie aujourd'hui cher, très cher, la lâcheté des autres hommes marocains. Chaque jour il s'enfonce un peu plus dans l'enfer du masochisme. Il aurait aimé que tu sois là pour le guérir un peu, le materner encore, bien qu'il ait dépassé la cinquantaine depuis plusieurs années déjà.

Nous aussi nous l'avons aimé follement, ce frère aîné. Ce Slimane. Sans jamais penser à remettre en question son statut, son aura, son silence, ce à quoi il avait si naturellement droit. Aujourd'hui, c'est fini. Dès que tu es morte, la révolte contre lui a commencé. On ne t'avait même pas encore enterrée qu'il n'était déjà plus le roi incontesté.

Ce sont les filles, mes sœurs, qui l'ont détrôné, qui ont osé lui parler avec le langage de la vérité crue. Je n'étais pas là pour assister à cette scène révolutionnaire. Mon avion n'était pas encore arrivé à Rabat. Mais on m'a tout raconté. On m'a dit comment les filles lui avaient crié dessus d'une seule voix:

« Tu n'auras pas ce à quoi nous avons droit, nous, par la loi. Ta part d'héritage, tu l'as déjà obtenue et gaspillée du vivant de Malika. Tu n'auras rien d'autre, Slimane. Rien. »

Je les admire, mes sœurs, et je leur baise les pieds. Je n'aurais pas osé, moi, lui parler comme ça, vrai, dur, révolté. J'aurais été encore pétrifié devant lui, impressionné par le silence qu'il m'impose dès qu'il apparaît. Je lui aurais pardonné. Je lui aurais tout offert, même ma part d'héritage. Il est le grand frère. Je suis le petit. Encore aujourd'hui dans un amour aveugle, infini, pour lui.

Tu n'as pas donné grand-chose à tes filles. Peu d'amour. Peu de solidarité. Peu de compréhension. Mais ce sont elles qui ont sauvé la situation, qui ont fait appliquer la

is today. Submissive to any woman other than you.

You're no longer there to guide him, dry his tears, save money for him, just in case. You're no longer his master, his mentor. Another woman took your place. On him, on his body, this woman takes revenge for everything that Morocco reserves as a cruel fate for women. Slimane today pays dearly, dearly, for the cowardice of other Moroccan men. Every day he sinks a little deeper into the hell of masochism. He would have liked you to be there to heal him a little, to mother him again, although he has been in his fifties for several years already.

We too loved him madly, this older brother. This Slimane. Without ever thinking of questioning his status, his aura, his silence, all that he was so naturally entitled to. Today, it's over. As soon as you died, the revolt against him began. We hadn't even buried you and already, he was no longer the undisputed king.

It was the girls, my sisters, who dethroned him, who dared to speak to him with the language of raw truth. I wasn't there to witness this revolutionary scene. My plane had not yet arrived in Rabat. But they told me everything. I was told how the girls shouted at him in one voice:

“You will not have what we are entitled to by law. Your share of inheritance, you already got it and wasted it during Malika's lifetime. You won't get anything else, Slimane. Nothing.”

I admire them, my sisters, and I kiss their feet. I wouldn't have dared talk to him like that: real, hard, rebellious. I would have still been petrified before him, intimidated by the silence he imposes on me as soon as he appears. I would have forgiven him. I would have offered him everything, even my share of inheritance. He's the big brother. I'm the little brother. Still today, my love for him is blind, infinite.

You didn't give your daughters much. Not a lot of love. Not much solidarity. Very little understanding. But it was they who saved the situation, who enforced justice:

justice : elles l'ont réclamée, elles l'ont fait exister. Et c'est seulement après cela, après ce geste violent et nécessaire, qu'elles sont allées s'occuper de ton corps, le préparer pour l'enterrement.

Elles ont tout dit au grand frère. Elles n'ont eu ni honte ni peur. D'un seul coup, elles étaient son égal. Mieux que lui. Elles parlaient. Il se taisait.

« Tu vas maintenant, MAINTENANT, chez toi et tu ramènes tous les papiers officiels importants que notre mère t'a confiés. Ils sont à nous, ces papiers. À NOUS. Sinon, on n'enterre pas ta mère. Tu as compris ? Tu veux qu'on te répète le message ? » La femme de Slimane était là elle aussi. Elle a compris que, face à l'autorité soudaine qui émanait de mes sœurs, elle n'avait pas intérêt à intervenir. Ce n'était pas par solidarité féminine. Pas du tout. Comme ton fils aîné, sa femme était choquée. Elle avait tout prévu sauf cette révolte assumée, frontale, jusqu'au-boutiste. Elle n'a rien dit parce qu'elle a su très vite qu'elle n'avait plus rien à dire. Elle avait perdu. Slimane a regardé les filles avec ses yeux des jours noirs. Il a cru une seconde que cela allait suffire pour casser le mouvement. Puis, au bout d'une trop longue minute durant laquelle ma sœur Fatiha s'est rapprochée de lui et l'a affronté sans jamais baisser le regard, il a dit : « Demain... Je les ramène demain... » Fatiha s'est rapprochée davantage de lui, l'a saisi par le col et lui a aboyé : « Daba, Slimane... Maintenant, Slimane... Daba... » Personne ne l'a sauvé, ton fils. Pas même moi. Personne ne l'a défendu. Personne n'a eu pitié de lui. Parce qu'il ne méritait rien de tout cela.

Les filles n'ont rien eu de ton vivant, Malika. Tu ne les as pas arrêtées dans leurs mouvements de vie, tu ne les as pas empêchées d'étudier ni de se marier avec qui elles voulaient. Mais elles n'ont jamais été ta priorité. Elles le savaient et elles ont fait avec, malgré la douleur légitime qu'elles éprouvaient, le manque terrible qu'elles ressentaient tout au fond de leur âme. Elles te le reprochaient parfois. Cela ne changeait en rien ton comportement vis-à-vis d'elles.

they demanded it, they made it happen. And it was only after that, after this violent and necessary move, that they went to take care of your body, prepare it for burial.

They told the big brother everything. They had no shame or fear. In one fell swoop, they were his equal. Better than him. They were talking. He was silent.

“Go home now—NOW—and bring back all the important, official papers that our mother trusted you with. These papers are ours. OURS. Otherwise, we're not burying your mother. Get it? Want us to spell it out for you?” Slimane's wife was there too. She understood that, faced with the sudden authority emanating from my sisters, she had no interest in intervening. It wasn't out of female solidarity. Not at all. Like your eldest son, his wife was shocked. She had planned everything except my sisters' head-on, extremist revolt. She didn't say anything because she knew very quickly that there was nothing left for her to say. She had lost. Slimane looked at the girls with his eyes from the dark days. He thought for a second that it would be enough to break the movement. Then, after a minute that lasted too long, during which my sister Fatiha came close to him, confronted him, without ever lowering her gaze, he said, “Tomorrow... I'll bring them back tomorrow...” Fatiha came closer to him, grabbed him by the collar and barked at him, “Daba, Slimane... Now, Slimane... Daba...” No one saved your son. Not even me. No one defended him. No one took pity on him. Because he didn't deserve any of this.

The girls didn't have anything while you were alive, Malika. You didn't stop their movements in life, you didn't prevent them from studying or marrying whomever they wanted. But they were never your priority. They knew this and—despite the legitimate pain they were experiencing—they got by with the terrible absence they felt deep inside their souls. They sometimes blamed you. It didn't change your behaviour towards them. I reckon you didn't like them. Your war was

Je crois que tu ne les aimais pas. Ta guerre à toi se passait loin d'elles, dans un durcissement continué de ton cœur, dans l'oubli programmé des combats des autres femmes.

Seules les hommes comptaient.

Seul lui, Slimane, fils premier, adoré, vénéré, comptait.

Le jour même de ton enterrement, ton corps encore chaud, il n'était déjà plus l'homme de la famille. Et, au fond, personne ne l'a jamais été, sauf toi.

Il a baissé la tête et, accompagné de sa femme, il est reparti chez lui chercher les titres de propriété que les filles exigeaient.

Savais-tu qu'elles allaient se transformer si radicalement ce jour-là ? Devenir enfin comme toi, oublier leur cœur s'il le fallait pour obtenir gain de cause ? Avais-tu prévu tout cela ?

Je crois que oui. Bien sûr que oui.

Elles n'ont laissé à personne le soin de laver ton corps. Guidées par une fille pieuse du quartier, elles ont exprimé leur solidarité profonde avec toi, avec ton âme. Elles t'ont rendu hommage.

Elles étaient toutes les six autour de ton corps. Concentrées et émues. Il ne manquait même pas la septième fille : Hafssa. Elle est morte il y a longtemps, alors qu'elle avait à peine 2 ans. Elles ne l'ont jamais oubliée, Hafssa. Moi, je ne la connais que par son très beau prénom et les souvenirs d'elle que tu partageais avec nous de temps en temps, d'une manière brève, sèche. Hafssa est venue elle aussi : de très loin, elle a fait le voyage, elle a fait comme ses sœurs, elle a lavé ton corps et elle a prié pour toi.

« Elle a rajeuni, ma mère. Elle n'a plus de rides sur le visage. Regardez. Regardez. Sa peau est devenue plus claire. On voit ses veines. C'est bleu. On voit l'intérieur en elle. Regardez. Regardez. C'est rouge, rouge. Elle est plus jeune que nous, ma mère. Elle dort. C'est tout. Elle fort. Elle ne va plus crier. »

C'est ta fille Samira qui parle ainsi de toi. Et je suis surpris, plus que surpris. Elle n'a pas peur de toi morte. Elle n'est saisie par aucun sentiment étrange, par aucun vertige. Tu es sa mère. Tu es morte. Dans une heure

happening far away from them, in a continual hardening of your heart, in the deliberate forgetting of the struggles of other women.

Only men counted.

Only he, Slimane—the first son, adored son, revered son—counted.

The very day of your funeral, your body still warm, he was already no longer the man of the family. And, deep down, no one has ever been, except you.

He bowed his head and, accompanied by his wife, went home to pick up the title deeds that the girls demanded.

Did you know they were going to change so dramatically that day? Finally become like you, forget their heart if they needed to if it meant winning? Did you plan all this?

I think so. Of course I do.

They didn't let anyone wash your body. Guided by a pious girl from the neighbourhood, they expressed their deep solidarity with you, with your soul. They paid tribute to you.

All six of them were around your body. Focused and moved. Even the seventh daughter, Hafssa was there. She died a long time ago, when she was barely 2 years old. They never forgot her, Hafssa. I know her only by her beautiful first name and the memories of her that you shared with us from time to time, in a brief, dry way. Hafssa also came: from far away she made the journey, she did like her sisters, she washed your body and she prayed for you.

“My mother's gotten younger. She no longer has wrinkles on her face. Look. Look. Her skin became lighter. You can see her veins. They're blue. You can see the inside of her. Look. Look. It's red, red. My mother's younger than us. She's asleep. That's all. She strong. She's not gonna scream anymore.”

This is your daughter Samira talking about you. And I'm surprised, more than surprised. She's not afraid of you dead. She's not seized by any strange feeling, by any

elle ne pourra plus te toucher, sentir physiquement le lien avec toi. Elle n'a absolument pas peur. Elle te regarde. Elle te voit comme elle ne t'a jamais vue. Elle met sa main sur ton visage. Elle dit « ma petite maman » et elle ne pleure pas. Comme les autres sœurs, elle reste concentrée, elle ne veut pas rater ce dernier moment vrai avec toi, elle ne veut pas gâcher ce rituel. Elle y met tout son cœur. Elle te pardonne, tout et tout. Elle le dit.

« Allah, elle a été notre mère, notre mère jusqu'au bout. Accepte-la comme elle est. Ne retiens pas le mal qu'elle a pu nous faire. Je lui pardonne. Nous lui pardonnons, toutes. Absolument toutes. Allah, elle a été une bonne mère, une bonne maman, une bonne épouse. Pas toujours, c'est vrai. Mais nous lui pardonnons. Nous lui pardonnons, Allah. Devant Toi, en ce moment grand, j'en témoigne, sincère et vraie. Pardonne-lui. Pardonne-lui. Pardonne-lui. Nous Te la confions, propre, pure, purifiée. Nous réclamons pour elle Ta générosité et Ta clémence. Et Ta miséricorde. Prends-la et aime-la et protège-la jusqu'au moment de la Dernière Rencontre... Priez avec moi, mes sœurs. Priez pour elle. Chantez avec moi, mes sœurs, pour elle. Et ne pleurez pas. Ne pleurez pas en ce jour de départ, en ce jour de mariage avec Dieu... Chantez... Chantez, mes sœurs... »

On m'a raconté que tes filles se sont alors mises à psalmodier la même prière, d'une manière belle, légère, pieuse.

Plus tard, après ton enterrement, c'était autre chose. Des jours et des nuits de larmes silencieuses, en colère, enragées. Dans le manque terrible. Dans la solitude terrifiante. Moi, je n'ai pas pleuré. J'aurais aimé. Mais he n'ai pas pu.

J'ai appris la nouvelle par un SMS envoyé par mon petit frère Ali. « Notre mère est tombée après la rupture du jeûne. Hémorragie cérébrale. Appelle... »

J'ai appelé et appelé.

Je viens ? Je reste à Paris ?

Ne viens pas. C'est trop dur de la voir. Elle souffre. Elle est inconsciente et elle souffre. Ne viens pas.

vertigo. You're her mother. You're dead. In an hour she won't be able to touch you, physically feel any connection with you. She's not afraid at all. She's looking at you. She sees you like she never saw you. She puts her hand on your face. She says "my little mum" and she doesn't cry. Like the other sisters, she stays focused, she does not want to miss this last true moment with you, she does not want to spoil this ritual. She puts her heart into it. She forgives you for everything and all of it. She says so.

"Allah, she was our mother, our mother to the end. Accept her as she is. Do not hold onto the hurt she may have caused us. I forgive her. We all forgive her. Absolutely all of us. Allah, she was a good mother, a good mum, a good wife. Not always, it's true. But we forgive her. We forgive her, Allah. Before You, at this great moment, I testify, sincere and true.

Forgive her. Forgive her. Forgive her. We entrust her to You, clean, pure, purified. We ask for Your generosity and clemency. And Your mercy. Take her and love her and protect her until the moment of the Last Judgement... Pray with me, sisters. Pray for her. Sing with me, sisters, for her. And do not cry. Do not weep on this day of departure, on this day of marriage with God... Sing... Sing, my sisters..."

I was told that your daughters then began to chant the same prayer, in a beautiful, subdued, pious way.

Later, after your funeral, it was something else. Days and nights of silent, angry, enraged tears. In the terrible absence. In terrifying solitude. I didn't cry. I wish I had. But I couldn't.

I learned the news through a text message sent by my little brother Ali. "Our mother fell after breaking fast. Brain haemorrhage. Call..."

I called and called.

Am I coming? Am I staying in Paris?

Que faire de moi en ce mois d'août à Paris ? Où affronter la mort chaque jour un peu plus certaine ? Où fuir ?

Il fait chaud, terriblement. Je vais à la piscine de la rue de Pontoise deux fois par jour. J'y vais aux heures où je sais qu'elle sera presque vide.

Je plonge. Je crie dans l'eau. Je voyage dans l'eau, sous l'eau, envahi de l'intérieur par l'eau, avec toi.

Je suis plus que triste. Je suis en train de changer. de nouveau. D'autres révélations sur moi viennent. Je les vois venir. Je ne résiste surtout pas. Je suis (presque) nu dans l'eau bleue. Je vois du rouge parfois. Ton sang qui coule et coule encore. Une petite rivière souterraine, tout au fond de la piscine. Je m'en rapproche. Je veux qu'elle ma traverse, cette rivière, qu'elle passe par ma peau, mes os, mes cellules. Mais dès que je la touche elle s'évapore. La rivière de ton sang se dilue dans l'eau de la piscine. Elle n'existe plus. Mais ce n'est pas possible, pas possible. Je crie dans l'eau. Je ne respire plus. C'est le grand désespoir. Je ne m'apitoie pas sur moi-même. Je constate où j'en suis dans ce monde, dans cette vie et dans cette mort.

Maman, tu as disparu. Tu vas disparaître. Et on ne s'est rien dit. Je sais tout de toi. Tout. Mais tu ne sais pas l'essentiel sur moi, en moi. Tu ne sais pas ce que je veux que tu saches.

Je suis dans l'eau de la piscine et je veux y rester. Pendant toute une semaine, j'y vais chaque jour, deux fois par jour, pour me souvenir, mourir avec toi, comprendre petit à petit sans toi.

J'entends ta voix. Tu es partout et d'un coup nulle part.

Je ne te vois plus.

Je commence à t'en vouloir. Tu n'as pas le droit de partir, de mourir comme ça, sans moi.

Je t'en veux de plus en plus. Je ne suis pas comme ma sœur Samira, je n'ai pas de cœur tendre pour toi.

Je suis homosexuel. Tu m'as mis au monde homosexuel et tu as renoncé à moi.

Don't come. It's too hard to see her. She's in pain. She's unconscious and she's in pain. Don't come.

What to do with myself that August in Paris? Where to face the death that every day was a little more certain? Where to flee?

It's terribly hot. I go to the pool on Rue de Pontoise twice a day. I go there at times when I know it will be almost empty.

I dive. I scream in the water. I move through water, under water, invaded from the inside by water, with you.

I'm more than sad. I'm changing, again. More revelations about me come. I see them coming. I can't resist. I am (almost) naked in the blue water. I see red sometimes. Your blood flowing and flowing again. A small underground river, at the bottom of the pool. I'm getting closer. I want it to pass through me, through this river, through my skin, through my bones, through my cells.

But as soon as I touch it, it evaporates. The river of your blood is diluted in the water of the pool. She no longer exists. But it is not possible, not possible. I scream in the water. I'm not breathing. This is the great despair. I don't feel sorry for myself. I see where I am in this world, in this life and in this death.

Mum, you disappeared. You're gonna disappear. And we didn't tell each other. I know everything about you. Everything. But you do not know the essential thing about me, in me. You don't know what I want you to know.

I'm in the pool water and I want to stay there. For a whole week, I go there every day, twice a day, to remember, die with you, understand little by little without you.

I hear your voice. You're everywhere and suddenly nowhere.

I don't see you anymore.

I'm starting to resent you. You have no right to leave, to die like that, without me.

I blame you more and more. I'm not like my sister Samira, I have no tender heart for you.

I'm gay. You put me into the world a homosexual and you gave up on me.

C'est de ta faute, tout cela. Oui, entièrement de ta faute. Ce malheur interminable. Ces malentendus permanents. Ce sentiment que je ne peux pas exister vraiment quelque part. Pourtant, je suis toujours là, 40 ans, entre deux pays, la France et le Maroc, sans repère fixe, sans amour sûr, sans histoire légitime à moi et rien qu'à moi. Je suis perdu, depuis le départ, dans ton ventre déjà, en France encore plus que jamais.

Chaque matin je me renie. J'ouvre les yeux, je me rappelle que je suis homosexuel. J'ai beau avoir fait tout un travail pour m'accepter, me laver des insultes, j'ai beau me répéter depuis des années que j'ai le droit de vivre libre, vivre digne, vivre vivre, rien n'y fait : cette peau homosexuelle que le monde m'a imposée est plus forte que moi, plus dure, plus tenace. Cette peau, c'est ma vérité au-delà de moi. Je ne l'accepte pas complètement mais je sais que je n'existe que par elle, malgré mes multiples tentatives d'évasion, d'émancipation.

Tu es morte, Malika.

Je suis homosexuel. Plus homosexuel que jamais maintenant.

C'est comme si l'enfer intime que j'ai vécu jusque-là en tant qu'homosexuel n'était rien.

Tu es partie. Et je comprends enfin que, même loin de toi, ton existence me protégeait d'une certaine vérité.

La vérité ultime. L'enfer au sens propre.

Ce n'est qu'à partir du moment où tu es devenue une âme, rien qu'une âme, que j'ai eu la révélation de ma vraie existence, ma vraie nature.

Avant, je pensais et je vivais en pensant à moi en tant qu'homosexuel. À présent, vraiment seul dans le monde, sans aucune protection, je ne pense plus, je vois qui je suis. Homosexuel. Il n'y a plus de filtre. Je vois mon destin. Et je vois que plus rien n'arrêtera l'inéluctable. La mort dans la solitude absolue. Avec un cœur dur, fermé, de plus en plus sec. Un cœur dictateur.

C'est ce que j'ai été jusque-là. Jusqu'à ta mort.

It's all your fault. Yes, entirely your fault. This endless misfortune. These permanent misunderstandings. This feeling that I can't really exist somewhere. Yet I am still here, 40 years old, between two countries, France and Morocco, with no fixed reference, no sure love, no legitimate history that's mine and no one else's. I was lost, since the beginning, in your belly already, in France even more than ever.

Every morning I disown myself. I open my eyes, I remember that I'm gay. I may have done a lot of work to accept myself, to wash away insults. I may have told myself again and again for years that I have the right to live free, live dignified, live life, nothing works: this homosexual skin that the world has imposed on me is stronger than me, harder, more tenacious. This skin is my truth and exists beyond me. I don't accept it completely but I know that I exist only by it, despite my multiple attempts to escape, to emancipate myself.

You're dead, Malika.

I'm gay. Gayer than ever now.

It's as if the inner hell I've been through up to this point as a homosexual is nothing. Compared to this.

You left. And I finally understand that, even far from you, your existence protected me from a certain truth.

The ultimate truth. Literal hell.

Only from the moment you became a soul, nothing but a soul, did I have the revelation of my true existence, my true nature.

I used to live and think about myself as gay. Now, truly alone in the world, without any protection, I no longer think, I see who I am. Gay. There is nothing clouding my vision anymore. I see my destiny. And I see that nothing will stop the inevitable. Death in absolute solitude. With a hard heart, closed, getting drier and drier. The heart of a dictator.

That's what I've been so far. Until you died.

Ceux qui m'ont aimé ces dix dernières années, he les ai détruits. Ils m'ont amusé un temps, puis, intraitable, j'ai déclenché pour chacun d'eux un système de destruction. Je les quittais après leur avoir fait goûter un peu au paradis. Je les oubliais, d'un coup. Je les fuyais, du jour au lendemain. Ils n'étaient plus soudain à la hauteur. Ils avaient beau essayé de me retenir, pleurer, supplier, je ne revenais jamais sur ma décision de me séparer d'eux. J'avais tout fait pour qu'ils tombent, ces hommes. Maintenant : Ciao ! Je ne vous aime plus. Je ne suis plus à vous et mon cœur n'a jamais été complètement à vous. Ce n'est pas la peine de verser ces larmes, de vous plaindre. Vomissez-moi. Haïssez-moi. Maudissez-moi. Tuez-moi. Faites ce que vous voulez... Je ne reviendrai pas. Je suis loin, déjà. Je suis loin de vous, loin de tout, loin même de moi.

Je revenais à ce cœur égoïste que tu m'as donné, Malika. Et, crois-le ou pas, cela me soulageait chaque fois. Partir. Quitter. Rompre. Casser le lien. Ne rien laisser à l'autre. Retourner à la case départ. Seul. Avec mon cœur terrible, terrifiant.

Avec le temps, surtout en France, terminer une relation, briser mon couple, jeter par terre l'autre, l'amour, me donnait une jouissance rare. Par ma propre volonté, je me retrouvais plus seul que jamais. Plus personne pour m'emprisonner avec ses sentiments pour moi, avec son affection et son sexe. J'étais seul et dur. Seul et seul.

J'avais l'impression que j'existais enfin, dans ce plaisir pervers, dans cette solitude déterminée, dans le rapprochement avec toi, maman, avec ce que j'ai appris de toi. Être impitoyable.

Tu ne voulais pas de moi. Tu avais l'intention de me tuer. Et pourtant, de tout tes enfants, je suis celui qui te ressemble le plus. J'ai exactement le même cœur que toi.

J'ai ton cœur. C'est tout ce qu'il me reste jusqu'à la mort.

Tu m'as raconté tellement de fois le rêve de ton fils aîné, Slimane.

Tu étais enceinte de moi. Tu croyais que j'étais une fille. Sûrement une fille. Tu en avais déjà six, des filles. Pas une autre. À

Those who loved me these last ten years, I destroyed them. They amused me for a while, then, I unleashed on them an uncompromising system of destruction. I left them after giving them a taste of heaven. Then all of a sudden, I forgot them. Overnight, I was running away from them. They were suddenly no longer up to the task. They had tried to keep me, cry, beg, I never reneged on my decision to part ways. I did everything I could to make these men fall. Now: Ciao! I don't love you anymore. I'm not yours anymore and my heart has never been yours at all. It's not worth shedding those tears, complaining. Vomit me. Hate me. Curse me. Kill me. Do what you want... I'm not coming back. I'm already far away. I am far from you, far from everything, far from even me.

I returned to that selfish heart you gave me, Malika. And, believe it or not, it took the weight off every time. Leave. Quit. Break up. Sever the tie. Leave nothing to the other person. Go back to square one. Alone. With my terrible, terrifying heart.

Over time, especially in France, ending a relationship, breaking up with a guy, throwing him, love on the ground, gave me a rare enjoyment. By my own will, I found myself more alone than ever. No one left to imprison me with his feelings, with his affection and his dick. I was alone and hard. Alone and lonely.

I felt like I finally existed in this perverse pleasure, in this determined solitude, in rapprochement with you, Mum, with what I learned from you. To be ruthless.

You didn't want me. You wanted to kill me. And yet, of all your children, I am the one who resembles you most. We have exactly the same heart.

I have your heart. That's all I have until death.

You've told me so many times about the dream of your eldest son, Slimane.

You were pregnant with me. You thought I was a girl. Probably a girl. You already had six girls. Not another one. What is the point



quoi bon souffrir encore une fois, neuf mois, pour mettre au monde une fille, une septième fille ? Non et non ! Celles que tu avais autour de toi ne te satisfaisaient plus. Que des déceptions avec les filles !

J'étais dans ton ventre. Deux mois. Trois mois. Tu n'as rien dit aux autres, et surtout pas au père, Hamid. Tu n'as révélé ton secret qu'à Slimane. Et tu lui as dit que tu allais te débarrasser de moi. Tu avais besoin de son aide pour cela. Il était d'accord pour commettre ce crime.

D'abord, endormir le fœtus que j'étais dans ton ventre. Arrêter sa croissance.

Ensuite, dans le hammam du quartier, boire un breuvage sorcier qui ma fera sortir de ton ventre. Je viendrai au monde mort, une fille en devenir née morte. Je ne sentirai rien de la chaleur de ce monde, je ne prendrai avec moi comme souvenir que l'enfer du hamac.

Je sortirai de ton vagin. Tu me feras glisser avec des coups brefs de jets d'eau jusqu'à l'évier central du hamac où, mélangé à la saleté des corps, je disparaîtrai définitivement.

Personne ne s'apercevra de rien.

Naître. Mourir. Mourir encore un peu plus. Enterré dans les égouts.

À peu de chose près, Malika, tu aurais pu ne jamais savoir que tu te trompais.

[...]

## MAI 1990

Ahmed, mon petit frère... « Tu es celui qui est digne d'être aimé. » C'est ce que Simone m'a dit quand j'ai essayé de lui expliquer le sens de mon prénom en arabe. Lahbib. Al-habib. Je lui ai dit tous les mots qui se rapprochent de ce prénom. L'amour. L'objet d'amour. Celui qui est proche de l'amour. Proche d'Allah. Je lui ai dit aussi que c'est un des 99 noms pour dire, s'adresser à Dieu en Islam. L'aimer. Le vénérer. Le chanter. Le caresser. Toutes ces explications lui ont fait plaisir, l'ont fait sourire, l'ont attendrie. Simone croit en Dieu

of suffering again for nine months to give birth to a daughter, a seventh daughter? No, no! The ones you had around you didn't satisfy you anymore. What disappointments you had with girls!

I was in your belly. Two months. Three months. You didn't say anything to the others, especially not to the father, Hamid. You only revealed your secret to Slimane. And you told him you were going to get rid of me. You needed his help for this. He agreed to commit this crime.

First, put the foetus in your belly—me—to sleep. Stop it from growing.

Then, in the neighbourhood hammam, drink a sorcerer's brew that will flush me out of your belly. I will arrive in the world dead, a girl half-made, born dead. I won't feel the heat of this world, the hell of the womb my only memory.

I will come out of your vagina. You will make me slide out with short blasts of jets of water, out of the womb and into the sink where, mixed with the filth of bodies, I will disappear once and for all.

No one will notice a thing.

Born. Die. Die a little more. Buried in the sewers.

Malika, you were so close to never knowing you were wrong.

[...]

## MAY 1990

Ahmed, *mon petit frère*,

“You are he who is worthy of being loved.”

This is what Simone told me when I tried to explain to her the meaning of my name in Arabic. Lahbib. *Al-habib*. I told her all the words that come close to this name. Love. The object of love. The one who is close to love. Close to Allah. I also told her that this is one of the 99 names to say, to address God in Islam. Love Him. Worship Him. Sing Him. Caress Him. All these explanations made her happy, made her smile, softened her. Simone believes in God too, Ahmed.

elle aussi, Ahmed. Le même que moi, que nous, appelé d'autres noms.

Quand j'ai eu fini mes explications, Simone a prononcé mon prénom et elle a dit avec une tendresse incroyable :

« Tu a celui qui est digne d'être aimé. »

Elle ne se moquait pas de moi, Simone. Je te le jure. Elle était sincère. Elle ne jouait pas avec moi, comme le fait souvent son fils, Gérard.

Elle s'est intéressée à moi et elle m'a demandé des choses sur moi, sur ce que je suis tout au fond et ce que je pense du monde, du Maroc, des autres.

Petit frère, petit Ahmed, je veux avant de dormir te parler de cette femme. Elle a ouvert mon cœur et elle m'a fait rêver pendant les trois heures que j'ai passées avec elle dans le jardin de la villa de son fils, dans le quartier Hassan à Rabat. Trois heures sans Gérard. Seulement elle et moi. Dans le grand jardin, et puis après dans la cuisine.

Elle m'a dit de ne pas l'appeler « Simone » mais « Simona ». « Simona » est son vrai prénom, quand elle vivait encore en Italie, en Sicile, dans une toute petite ville, Modica je crois. Elle a vécu dix ans là-bas. Puis ses parents ont émigré en France. Les gens ont commencé alors à l'appeler « Simone ». Mais elle n'aime pas « Simone ». Elle est Simona.

« Ce n'est pas la même chose », elle a dit.

Et elle avait raison. Ce n'est pas la même musique de tout.

« Gérard n'est pas là, appelle-moi "Simona" quand on n'est que tous les deux, toi et moi. Promis ? Viens avec moi dans la cuisine, on va préparer du hachis Parmentier. »

Ahmed, tu connais le hachis Parmentier, toi ? Moi, oui, à présent.

De la viande hachée, des pommes de terre cuites dans l'eau écrasées avec une grosse cuiller, une sauce tomate préparée avec des feuilles de laurier.

Simona a mélangé la viande hachée et la sauce tomate, a fait cuire tout cela pendant quinze minutes. Dans un grand plat, elle a mis une couche de sauce tomate puis une couche de pommes de terre. Deux fois. À la

The same as me, as us, but called by other names.

When I had finished my explanations, Simone pronounced my first name and she said with incredible tenderness:

"You are he who is worthy of being loved."

Simone wasn't making fun of me. I swear to you. She was sincere. She did not play with me, as her son, Gérard, often does.

She was interested in me and she asked things about me, about who I am deep down and what I think about the world, about Morocco, about other things.

*Petit frère*, little Ahmed, before I go to sleep I want to tell you about this woman. She opened my heart and made me dream during the three hours I spent with her in the garden of her son's villa, in the Hassan quarter of Rabat. Three hours without Gérard. Only her and me. In the large garden and then in the kitchen.

She told me not to call her "Simone" but "Simona". "Simona" is her real name, from when she was still living in Italy, in Sicily, in a very small town, Modica I think. She lived there for ten years. Then her parents emigrated to France. People then began to call her "Simone". But she does not like "Simone". She's Simona.

"It's not the same," she said.

And she was right. It doesn't carry the same melody at all.

"Gérard is not here, call me 'Simona' when it's just us two. Promise? Come with me to the kitchen, we'll make some *hachis Parmentier*."

Ahmed, do you know *hachis Parmentier*? I do now.

Minced meat, potatoes cooked in water crushed with a large spoon, tomato sauce prepared with bay leaves.

Simona mixed minced meat and tomato sauce, cooked all this for fifteen minutes. In a large dish, she put a layer of tomato sauce and then a layer of potatoes. Twice.

fin, elle a fait cuire de nouveau tout cela dans le four durant trente minutes.

On est revenus dans le jardin et c'est à ce moment-là qu'elle m'a posé des questions sur moi, sur mon prénom.

« Tu es celui qui est digne d'être aimé. »

Je l'ai crue, Ahmed. Je le crois. Personne m'avait jamais dit cela. Même pas juste pour me faire un tout petit peu plaisir. Même Gérard, à qui je donne mon cul, mon sexe et ma peau depuis l'âge 14 ans, n'a jamais pensé à me mentir comme ça. Comme Simona.

« Tu dois fuir un jour Lahbib. Tu le sais. »

Elle a dit cette phrase quand on était de nouveau dans la cuisine pour sortir le plat du four. Elle l'a mis au bord de la fenêtre. Et elle a dit la phrase.

Partir, un jour... Fuir...

Je croyais qu'elle parlait du Maroc. Quitter ce pays, cette terre, rêver ailleurs de liberté impossible. Mais je ne trompais, Ahmed. Je me suis rendu compte de mon erreur la semaine dernière.

Comme chaque mercredi après-midi, je suis allé chez Gérard. Il était seul dans la villa. Simona était partie, rentrée en France.

C'est tout ce qu'il m'a dit, Gérard. Et je n'ai pas osé poser plus de questions. Tu sais à quel point il est impressionnant, Gérard. Parfois, je ne sais même pas comment respirer quand je suis à côté de lui. J'oublie de la faire. Il me terrifie. Il me possède. « Tu es comme un esclave pour lui », c'est ce que tu as toujours dit, Ahmed.

J'avais acheté un bouquet de fleurs pour l'offrir à Simona.

Dans un pays très lointain qu'on appelle la France, Simona était redevenue Simone. Et Gérard a cru que les fleurs étaient pour lui.

« Tu l'aimes, ton Gérard ? »

Je n'ai jamais su quoi répondre à cette question quand tu me le posais, Ahmed. Et tu l'as fait chaque fois qu'on est allés regarder passer les trains à côté de la gare de Salé-Tabriquet.

Je ne voulais pas lui donner les fleurs. Mais il a tendu les mains.

Qu'aurais-tu fait à ma place, Ahmed ?

Finally, she cooked all this again in the oven for thirty minutes.

We came back to the garden and that's when she asked questions about me, about my first name.

“You are he who is worthy of being loved.”

I believed her, Ahmed. I believe this. No one had ever told me that. Not even just to give me a little pleasure. Even Gérard, who I've given my ass, my dick and my skin to since I was 14, never thought to lie to me like that. Like Simona.

“You have to get out one day, Lahbib. You know that.”

She said this statement when we were in the kitchen again to take the dish out of the oven. She put it on the edge of the window. And she said the statement.

Get out, one day... Flee...

I thought she was talking about Morocco. Leaving this country, this land, dreaming elsewhere of impossible freedom. But I was wrong, Ahmed. I realised my mistake last week.

Like every Wednesday afternoon, I went to Gérard's. He was alone in the villa. Simona had left, returned to France.

That's all Gérard told me. And I didn't dare ask any more questions. You know how intimidating Gérard is. Sometimes I don't even know how to breathe when I'm next to him. I forget to do it. He terrifies me. He owns me. “You are like a slave to him,” is what you always said, Ahmed.

I bought a bouquet of flowers to give to Simona.

In a very distant country called France, Simona had become Simone again. And Gérard believed that the flowers were for him.

“Do you love him, your Gérard?”

I never knew what to answer when you asked me, Ahmed. And you did it every time we went to watch the trains pass by Salé-Tabriquet station.

I didn't want to give him the flowers. But he stretched out his hands.

Je n'aurai pas le temps d'entendre ta réponse. Je dois dormir. Mais toi, écoute-moi : il faut que cela serve de leçon à quelqu'un. Toi. Toi, Ahmed.

Simona ne parlait pas du tout du Maroc. C'est son fils qu'elle me disait de fuir. Elle voyait comment il me traitait et elle n'était pas d'accord. Elle n'approuvait pas. Il fallait fuir.

Simona disparue, impossible de la voir, de profiter de sa présence, alors que je venais avec des fleurs.

Simona dans une autre réalité m'a guidé.

Pendant les quelques secondes durant lesquelles j'ai tendu le bouquet de fleurs à Gérard, j'ai compris le message de Simona et j'ai cru que j'étais libéré de l'emprise de son fils. Que je pouvais le faire.

Je passe à l'acte. Je lui donne les fleurs à lui et je pars. Fais-le, Lahbib. Fais-le. Il a 45 ans, il a la villa à Rabat, il a un grand poste à l'ambassade de France, il a la virilité que tu désires, son sexe tu l'adores, ses poils te rendent fou, mais toi, toi, Lahbib, tu n'as que 17 ans. Tu n'as que 17 ans. Dans le monde, même au Maroc qui t'opprime et t'asphyxie, il y a autre chose. L'air appartient à tous. À nous tous, toutes. Tu peux vivre tant que tu respirez l'air qui est à toi.

Tu n'as que 17 ans, Lahbib.

Toi, Ahmed, tu as deux ans de moins que moi. 15 ans. Nous sommes copains, amis, frères. Nous avons toujours réussi à la rester. Des frères qui se chamaillent, qui se bagarrent, qui restent ensemble malgré tout. Des frères qui respectent la promesse. L'unique promesse qui compte. Se retrouver une fois par semaine devant les trains qui passent, parler de nous, toi et moi sans eux.

Tu n'as jamais aimé Gérard. Surtout quand il m'a demandé de t'amener toi aussi à la villa. Tu es venu mais tu as refusé d'aller au lit avec lui et moi.

Tu as toujours dit que Gérard était d'un monde que tu ne comprenais pas, que tu ne comprendrais jamais. Tu acceptais que je te donne un peu d'argent que je lui volais et tu disais : « C'est juste. Juste. Vole-le encore et

What would you have done if you were in my shoes, Ahmed?

I won't have time to hear your answer. I have to sleep. But you, listen to me: it must serve as a lesson to someone. You. You, Ahmed.

Simona was not talking about Morocco at all. She was telling me to run away from her son. She saw how he treated me and she didn't agree with it. She didn't approve. I had to flee.

When I came with flowers, Simona was gone, was impossible to see her, to enjoy her presence.

Simona from another reality guided me.

During the few seconds that I handed Gérard the bouquet of flowers, I understood Simona's message and believed that I was freed from the grip of her son. That I could do it.

I'm taking action. I'll give him the flowers and leave. Do it, Lahbib. Do it. He's 45 years old, he has the villa in Rabat, he has a great post at the French Embassy, he has the manliness you desire, his dick that you adore, his body hair that drives you crazy, but you, you, Lahbib, you are only 17 years old. You're only 17. In the world, even in Morocco, which oppresses and suffocates you, there's something else. Air belongs to everyone. To all of us. You can live as long as you breathe air that is yours.

You're only 17, Lahbib.

You, Ahmed, are two years younger than me. 15 years. We're mates, friends, brothers. We've always managed to stay that way. Brothers who bicker, who fight, who stay together despite everything. Brothers who keep the promise. The only promise that matters. Meet once a week in front of passing trains, talk about us, you and me without anyone else.

You never liked Gérard. Especially when he asked me to bring you to the villa too. You came but you refused to go to bed with him and me.

You always said that Gérard was from a world that you didn't understand, that you would never understand. You accepted when I gave you a little money that I was stealing

encore. » Tu ne voyais pas que je l'aimais profondément. Que j'étais fou de lui. Voler son argent était aussi une sorte de jeu entre nous, lui et moi. Cela l'excitait d'avoir un petit voleur marocain pédé dans son lit.

Je t'ai tout raconté, Ahmed. Nous avons analysé tout et tout. Notre amour et notre chute. Nos projets naïfs et nos petites morts. La vie qui nous attend, sur une autre planète et sous un autre soleil.

Tu ne comprenais pas tout. Tu es plus jeune que moi et je sais que tu seras différent de moi dans l'avenir. 15 ans ce n'est pas 17 ans. Pédés tous les deux, unis malgré eux, violés chaque semaine par les mêmes mecs virils et dégueulasses de notre quartier. Mais tu es jeune et je t'ai caché des choses. Tu ne dois pas tout savoir. La vérité n'est pas toujours bonne à savoir en entier. Je t'ai protégé, Ahmed. Et je sais que tu es furieux maintenant en lisant cette lettre. Que tu pleures. Tu pleures. Tu pleures...

Je t'ai laissé seul dans l'océan de l'amour vide.

Comment ai-je pu te faire cela ?

Écoute-moi. Continue de pleurer, mais écoute-moi. Écoute. Toi seul peux m'entendre et me porter à présent.

Gérard a pris le bouquet de fleurs, l'a mis de côté sans respirer dedans, et il m'a dit :

« Va prendre une douche, je t'attends au lit. Tu es sale, comme d'habitude. Va te laver ! »

J'avais fini par m'habituer à cette exigence. Il trouvait tout le temps que je puais et il ne pouvait faire du sexe avec moi qu'après que je m'étais lavé. Il aimait sentir le propre sur moi, le savon de Marseille ou bien surtout DOP, le savon des pauvres Marocains comme toi et moi.

La semaine dernière, Gérard a décidé de se venger, de me punir, de m'humilier.

Quand je suis allé le rejoindre au lit, il m'a dit :

« Ma mère t'aime bien... Elle m'a chargé de te transmettre ses salutations. »

J'ai souri grand. Simona ne m'avait pas oublié. Simona avait en elle mon prénom, dans son cœur mon image. Mais cela ne

from him. You would say, "It's just. Just. Steal it again and again." You didn't see that I loved him deeply. That I was crazy about him. Stealing his money was also a kind of game between us, him and me. It excited him to have a small Moroccan faggot thief in his bed.

I told you everything, Ahmed. We analysed all and everything. Our love and our loss. Our naive projects and our little deaths. The life that awaits us, on another planet and under another sun.

You didn't understand everything. You're younger than me and I know you will be different to me in the future. 15 is not 17. Both fags, united in spite of them all, raped every week by the same disgusting, macho guys in our neighbourhood. But you're young and I've been hiding things from you. You don't have to know everything. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth is not always good to know. I protected you, Ahmed. And I know you're furious now reading this letter. You're crying. You're crying. You're crying...

I left you alone in the empty ocean of love.

How could I do that to you?

Listen to me. Keep crying, but listen to me. Listen. Only you can hear me and hold me now.

Gérard took the bouquet of flowers, put it aside without smelling them, and he told me:

"Go take a shower, I'll wait for you in bed. You're dirty, as usual. Go wash yourself."

I'd finally gotten used to this requirement. He always thought I stank and he could only have sex with me after I had washed. He liked to smell cleanliness on me, Marseille soap or especially DOP, the soap of poor Moroccans like you and me.

Last week, Gérard decided to have his revenge, punish me, humiliate me.

When I went to join him in bed, he told me:

"My mother likes you... She told me to give you her regards."

I had a wide smile on. Simona had not forgotten me. Within her, Simona had my

plaisait pas du tout à Gérard. Je le voyais maintenant, dans ses yeux en colère.

Il était sur le lit. Il était tellement beau. Tellement important. Son sexe dur, déjà. Il était tout ce que nous ne serons jamais toi et moi. Un Français qui a tout, qui a la belle vie, qui a le Maroc à ses pieds. Gérard est ce que nous ne deviendrons jamais, Ahmed.

Il m'a dit de m'allonger à côté de lui. Je l'ai fait. Et, sans me regarder, il a poursuivi son humiliation de Lahbib :

« La semaine dernière, tu as volé plus que ce qui était prévu, convenu entre nous. Tu as pris 500 dirhams. Tu ne dois voler que 200 dirhams... C'est dans le contrat... Tu m'as trahi... Je ne peux plus te faire confiance... Je ne peux plus faire du sexe avec toi... Tu me dégoûtes... »

Il ne plaisantait pas. Et je savais qu'il ne fallait pas le supplier. Il ne fallait rien dire.

J'ai pleuré. Nu. En silence.

J'ai compris à ce moment-là deux choses :

- 1) Gérard était jaloux du lien vrai et sincère entre Simona et moi.
- 2) Gérard avait enfin trouvé la bonne occasion pour se débarrasser de moi. J'étais désormais trop vieux. 17 ans et déjà trop vieux. Pire : je n'avais même pas réussi à lui ramener mon remplaçant. Toi. Toi, Ahmed.

J'ai pleuré. Et j'ai commencé à me préparer à mourir.

J'ai pris alors cette décision. Mourir. Partir. Très vite. Plus personne, plus rien ne pourrait me retenir.

Je l'aimais, Gérard. Je l'aimais sans comprendre tout et tout de ce qui se passait entre nous. Je l'aimais et, sans lui, je me serais donné la mort bien avant l'âge de 14 ans.

Gérard s'est tourné vers moi dans le lit. Il a essuyé mes larmes. Et il a dit :

« Va prendre une deuxième douche. »

De l'espoir dans mon cœur.

Nous allons nous réconcilier. Faire l'amour. Le sexe.

Je le laisserai entrer en moi au-delà des limites et des peurs. Je crierai plus fort que les autres fois : il aime ça, mes cris et mon

name. In her heart, my image. But Gérard didn't like this at all. I could see it now, in his angry eyes.

He was on the bed. He was so beautiful. So important. His dick hard, already. He was everything that you and I will never be. A Frenchman who has everything, who has the good life, who has Morocco at his feet. Gérard is what we will never become, Ahmed.

He told me to lie next to him. I did. And, without looking at me, he kept up his humiliation of Lahbib:

“Last week, you stole more than was planned and agreed between us. You took 500 dirhams. You're to steal only 200 dirhams. It's in the contract. You betrayed me. I can't trust you anymore. I can't have sex with you anymore. You disgust me.”

He wasn't kidding. And I knew I couldn't beg. Nothing could be said.

I cried. Naked. In silence.

I understood at that moment two things:

- 1) Gerard was jealous of the genuine, sincere bond between Simona and me.
- 2) Gerard had finally found the right opportunity to get rid of me. I was too old now. 17 years old and already too old. Worse: I had not even managed to bring back my replacement. You. You, Ahmed.

I cried. And I began to prepare myself for death.

I made that decision. Die. Leave. Very quickly. No one, nothing could hold me back.

I loved Gérard. I loved him without understanding all that was happening between us. I loved him and, without him, I would have killed myself long before I was 14.

Gérard turned to me in bed. He wiped away my tears. And he said:

“Go take a second shower.”

Hope in my heart.

We were going to make up. Make love. Sex.

I'll let him into me beyond limits and fears. I'll shout louder than the other times:

affolement. Et, quand ça sera mon tour, en lui je serai moins brusque, je serai discipliné, constant, dans mes mouvements. Je serai obéissant de bout en bout, comme il veut.

Je ne parlerai plus jamais de Simona avec lui. J'ai compris que sa jalousie était légitime. Elle est sa mère à lui. Pas la mienne. Il a raison de ne la garder que pour lui.

Sous la douche, je répétais et je construisais ce nouvel acte. Ce nouveau bonheur. Laver mon corps déjà propre, je ne l'ai pas vécu comme une humiliation.

C'est cela que Gérard veut, alors je le fais sans discuter. Je ferai même mieux : puisque cela n'a pas marché avec toi, Ahmed, je dois lui trouver quelqu'un d'autre. Un autre Lahbib plus jeune. Je dois. Je dois si je veux que Gérard me garde. Me pardonne et me garde.

L'idée de mourir pour de vrai était partie de mon esprit. J'étais optimiste. Trop, bien sûr. Trop optimiste et trop aveugle depuis toujours.

À 17 ans, je ne faisais plus l'affaire pour Gérard. Tout au fond de mon cœur, je le savais. Je le savais... J'ai expiré.

J'ai tout fait pour garder l'espoir visible sur mon visage. Dans la chambre à coucher, je l'ai offert à Gérard, cet espoir. Il était à la fenêtre, toujours nu. Il fumait. Il s'est retourné vers moi et il a dit :

« Allonge-toi, j'arrive... Je termine ma cigarette... »

Il n'est pas venu. Il a fumé sa cigarette. Puis une deuxième. Puis une troisième...

C'était plus que de l'humiliation. Je ne savais plus pourquoi j'étais puni. Je ne comprenais plus rien à rien.

Nu sur le lit, j'ai pensé à toi, Ahmed. J'ai pensé que j'allais ta raconter tout cela, ce reject dans l'amour, ce désespoir définitif. J'ai pensé à quoi te dire pour te protéger de tout cela. Et j'ai su que je n'aurais pas le temps de le faire.

Le désir de mourir était revenu.

En finir là, maintenant, tout de suite. Sauter par la fenêtre. Mourir dans le jardin où Simona m'avait dit : « Tu es celui qui est digne d'être aimé. »

he likes it, my screams and my panic. And, when it is my turn, I'll be less abrupt in him, I'll be disciplined, constant in my movements. I'll be obedient from start to finish, as he wants.

I'll never talk to him about Simona again. I understood that his jealousy was legitimate. She's his mother. Not mine. He's right to keep her to himself.

In the shower, I was rehearsing and constructing this new act. This new happiness. Washing my already clean body, I did not feel it as a humiliation.

That's what Gérard wants, so I do it without arguing. I'll even do better: since it didn't work with you, Ahmed, I have to find him someone else. Another younger Lahbib. I have to. I have to if I want Gérard to keep me. Forgive me and keep me.

The idea of dying for real was on my mind. I was optimistic. Too optimistic, of course. Too optimistic and too blind since forever.

At 17, I was no longer doing the job for Gérard. Deep in my heart, I knew it. I knew it... I expired.

I did everything to keep the hope visible on my face. In the bedroom, I offered it to Gerard, this hope. He was at the window, still naked. He smoked. He turned to me and he said:

“Lie down, I'm coming. I'm finishing my cigarette...”

He didn't come. He smoked his cigarette. Then a second one. Then a third...

It was more than humiliation. I didn't know why I was being punished. I didn't understand anything anymore.

Naked on the bed, I thought of you, Ahmed. I thought I was going to tell you all this, this rejection in love, this definitive despair. I thought what to tell you to protect you from all this. And I knew I wouldn't have time to do it.

The desire to die had returned.

End it there now, right now. Jump out the window. Die in the garden where Simona

Gérard a finalement parlé. Il n'avait plus envie de sexe. Il n'avait plus envie de cela avec moi.

Je me suis levé et j'ai proposé d'aller me lacer une troisième fois.

Il n'a rien répondu.

Le silence de cet instant a duré une éternité.

J'ai senti l'odeur de la mort qui se rapprochait de moi.

Gérard est allé vers son bureau, a ouvert un tiroir, en a sorti des billets et me les a donnés.

« Je vais aller me doucher moi aussi. »

Cela signifiait : Je ne veux pas te revoir ici, dans la villa, quand j'aurai terminé.

Je me suis rhabillé très vite. J'ai pris l'argent. Et je suis parti.

Le fin de l'amour. Le fin de la vie. Pourquoi continuer à exister, à présent ? Pourquoi ? Pour toi, Ahmed, mon petit frère ?

Pardonne-moi. Pardonne-moi.

Je croyais que Gérard allait me sauver, me garder avec lui pour toujours, me trouver du travail, me guider dans l'enfer de mon existence marocaine. Je croyais que j'allais vieillir à ses côtés. Je croyais qu'il était mon prince à tout jamais.

17 ans et tout est déjà fini. Fini. Fini.

Mon cœur, mon sexe, mon destin, mes yeux, mes visions, tout est fini.

Au fond, ce n'est pas moi qui ai décidé d'en finir. Je suis juste allé au bout de la logique de ce monde. Notre monde et celui de Gérard.

C'est que Allah, *Al-habib*, a décidé pour moi.

Je ne pouvais plus attendre dans le lit de Gérard et sa villa. Je ne pouvais plus revenir à notre première prison. Notre quartier pauvre à Salé. Ma famille et ses interminables problèmes d'argent. Mes parents et leur étroitesse d'esprit.

J'ai marché dans les rues de Rabat. Le quartier de Hassan a soudain été envahi par la brume qui venait de l'océan Atlantique tout proche. Il y avait du sel dans l'air. De la mer. De la mort.

had told me: "You are he who is worthy of being loved."

Gérard finally spoke. He didn't want sex anymore. He didn't want that with me anymore.

I got up and offered to go wash a third time.

He didn't say anything.

The silence of that moment lasted forever.

I felt the smell of death approaching me.

Gérard went to his desk, opened a drawer, took out some notes and gave them to me.

"I'm gonna go shower too."

He meant: I don't want to see you again here in the villa when I'm done.

I got dressed very quickly. I took the money. And I left.

The end of love. The end of life. Why continue to exist now? Why? For you, Ahmed, *mon petit frère*?

Forgive me. Forgive me.

I thought Gerard was going to save me, keep me with him forever, find me work, guide me through the hell of my Moroccan existence. I thought I was going to grow old by his side. I thought he was my prince forever.

17 years and it's all finished already. Finished. Finished.

My heart, my dick, my destiny, my eyes, my visions, it's all over.

Basically, it's not me who decided to end it. I just followed this world to its logical conclusion. Our world and Gérard's.

It's what Allah, *Al-habib*, decided for me.

I could no longer wait in Gérard's bed and his villa. I couldn't go back to our first prison. Our poor neighbourhood in Salé.

My family and its endless money problems. My parents and their narrow-mindedness.

I walked the streets of Rabat. The Hassan quarter was suddenly invaded by the mist that came from the Atlantic Ocean nearby. There was salt in the air. Sea. Death.



Sauter su pont qui relie Rabat à Salé. Sauter dans le fleuve Bou Regreg en plein jour.

C'était ça la solution. Vite. Vite, Lahbib !

J'ai pris ta main, Ahmed, et j'ai traversé les blocs qui me séparaient du pont.

Tu ne savais rien, Ahmed. Tu me faisais confiance. Je ne pouvais partir sans te dire adieu. Sans te donner tout l'amour qui restait vivant encore en moi.

Tu ne disais rien. Marcher côte à côte, c'était ce que tu aimais le plus entre toi et moi. Avaler les kilomètres. Rêver à deux en silence. Devenir frères malgré la détresse qui sépare.

Tu vas marcher seul maintenant, Ahmed. Pardon. Pardon.

Je ne t'ai pas tout dit de ce que je vivais loin de toi, à Rabat. Avec Gérard et ses amis. J'ai accepté ce qu'ils me faisaient. Je me suis vendu. L'amour pour Gérard me guidait, me protégeait, donnait sens à ce chaos, à ce massacre interminable.

L'amour pour Gérard est toujours vivant. Mais sans lui. Il m'a lâché. Il m'a rendu à moi-même, à ma pauvreté, à mon corps sale.

La lumière du soleil réussissait à traverser la brume dans les quartiers de Rabat. Elle me touchait délicatement, amoureuxment.

J'ai lâché ta main, Ahmed. J'ai tourné le dos à Gérard. Et j'ai commencé à courir vers le pont. Vers le fleuve.

Courir. Courir. Ne surtout pas réfléchir.

Tout est fini pour moi. Ça se passera vite. J'ai le courage en moi.

Saute. Saute, Lahbib ! Tu es celui est digne d'être aimé, saute.

Je cours. Et je t'écris, Ahmed. Dans ton cœur, tu trouveras ma lettre, ces derniers mots.

Ne retiens de moi que l'amour sincère entre nous, Ahmed. Nous marchons sans nous fatiguer et nous regardons passer les trains.

Ils passent sans arrêt, les trains, sans nous prendre avec eux.

Garde le monde et l'espoir vivants en toi. Même difficile, tu dois porter jusqu'au bout cette mission.

Jump from the bridge that connects Rabat to Salé. Jump into the Bou Regreg river in broad daylight.

That was the solution. Hurry up. Hurry, Lahbib!

I took your hand, Ahmed, and crossed the blocks that separated me from the bridge.

You didn't know anything, Ahmed. You trusted me. I couldn't leave without saying goodbye. Without giving you all the love that was still alive in me.

You didn't say anything. Walking side by side was what you liked the most between us. Devouring the kilometres. Dreaming together in silence. Becoming brothers despite the suffering that separates.

You're going to walk alone now, Ahmed. Sorry. Sorry.

I didn't tell you everything about the life I was living away from you, in Rabat. With Gérard and his friends. I accepted what they were doing to me. I sold myself. Love for Gérard guided me, protected me, gave meaning to this chaos, to this endless massacre.

Love for Gérard is still alive. But without him. He let me go. He returned me to myself, to my poverty, to my dirty body.

The sunlight managed to pass through the mist in the neighbourhoods of Rabat. It touched me delicately, lovingly.

I let go of your hand, Ahmed. I turned my back on Gérard. And I started running to the bridge. To the river.

Run. Run. And most of all: don't think about it.

It's all over for me. It will happen quickly. I have the courage in me.

Jump. Jump, Lahbib! You are he who is worthy of being loved, jump.

I'm running. And I'm writing to you, Ahmed. In your heart you will find my letter, these last words.

Remember of me only the true love between us, Ahmed. We walk without getting tired and we watch the trains pass.

The trains pass without stopping, without taking us with them.

Pardon, Ahmed. Pardon.

Un jour, tu me vengeras. Je le sais. J'en suis convaincu. Fais-le. Fais-le.

N'oublie pas. Ne m'oublie pas. Tu dois me rendre justice. Me porter mort et vivant dans ton cœur.

Partout, je serai avec toi.

Je saute dans le fleuve.

Je suis avec toi.

À bientôt, Ahmed,

Lahbib

Keep the world and hope alive in you.

Even when difficult, you have to carry out this mission to the end.

Sorry, Ahmed. Sorry.

One day you will avenge me. I know this. I'm convinced. Do it. Do it.

Don't forget. Don't forget me. You have to do me justice. Carry me dead and alive in your heart.

I'll be with you everywhere.

I'm jumping into the river.

I'm with you.

See you soon, Ahmed,

Lahbib

## CONTRIBUTORS

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