

Current Issue

Fall 2010

VOLUME 4 Number 2

Ezra, flexing and stretching, announces that—along with classical Latin works in past issues—the current number gathers work from the 8th century Old English to 21st century Farsi.

In a first for us, we include Olga Zaslavsky's self-translation of her prose fiction.

This year's ALTA conference, in Philadelphia (October), was rich and convivial as ever. Noteworthy were panels on teaching translation and on publishing. Hats off to New Directions (who were present) as the house turns 75. Ezra is reminded that Ugly Ducking Presse and Action Books are committed to translation. But if you submit, do send only a query letter.

The Letter that closes this issue is from Kerstin Lieff's *Letters from Berlin*, forthcoming soon and a translation of her mother's war letters. Ms. Lieff is an alumna of the University of New Orleans Low-Residency MFA program, translation workshop, which Ezra always recommends.

Very sad news: Michael Gizzi, a poet and featured writer in these pages, died in October. There are moving tributes on PennSound, UbuWeb, HG blog, and elsewhere. Jack Powers, poet and founder of Stone Soup in Boston, died this month as well. The Stone Soup venue promoted scores of great writers. Jack's phrase "When you read your poetry aloud you are already translating yourself" is a touchstone for Ezra.

Ezra tosses fitfully in the rumpled bed that is translation theory. One wishes much of it had the ontological emphasis of Jack's remark.

Culture is the design of each group's self-consciously imperfect telling of what is and what matters. Or so Ezra thinks. Translation is the re-telling: respectful of culture, yet tolerant—even exploitive—of uncertainty. Translation, as many have said, opens a "third space"—be it Frawley's "third code" or Christian Hawkey's (this year, ALTA panel) "ghost space." And this moving forward in or into a third space is akin to the artist's being ahead of the times rather than *in* them; this movement is antithetical to many public statements about culture and the polis which are *already* (we think of Jack Powers's *already translating*) not reality.

We have opened shadowy great fields in this issue. Welcome *in!*

Traduttori/traduttrici:

Don Mager

Alireza Jamalimanesh

Claudia Serea

Cui Ying

Crisman Cooley

Mike Garcia

Olga Zaslavsky

Kerstin Lieff

Emilie Pons

FEATURED TRANSLATOR:

Donald Mager, Professor of English, has degrees from Drake University (BA), Syracuse University (MA) and Wayne State University (PhD). He was the Mott University Professor of English at Johnson C. Smith University from 1998-2004 where he is now Dean of the College of Arts and Letters. As well as a number of scholarly articles, he has published over 200 poems and translations from German, Czech and Russian. His volumes of poetry are: *To Track the Wounded One*, *Glosses*, *That Which is Owed to Death*, *Borderings*, *Good Turns* and *The Elegance of the Ungraspable*, *Birth Daybook* and *Drive Time*. His webpage is www.donmager.org

Us Four Plus Four is an anthology of translations from eight major Soviet-era Russian poets. It is unique because it tracks almost a half century of their careers by simply placing the poems each wrote to the others in chronological order. The 85 poems represent one of the most fascinating conversations in poems produced by any group of poets in any language or time period. From poems of infatuation and admiration to anger and grief and even to deep tribute, this anthology invites readers into the unfolding lives of such inimitable creative forces as Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetaeva and Osip Mandelstam.

Dombey and Son

~~Translated by Don Mager

When, like a piercing whistle,
I hear English spoken—
I see Oliver Twist
At a desk piled with books.

With Charles Dickens you ask,
How was it then in London:
The old City, Dombey's desk,
The Thames, yellow-tan . . .

Rain and tears. A blond
Loving boy—Dombey's son;
And a clerk's knack for puns,
Self-taught in everything.

At the firm are broken stools,
Where pence and shillings are summed;
Like a hive whizzing with bees,
Ledgers swarm the year round.

Pity the grubby lawyer
Laboring in a tobacco haze—

Where a bankrupt seems to hover
From an old rope's noose.

The law's on the enemy's side:
Nothing can help him now!
In smock, drab and besotted,
His daughter clings and sobs . . .

OSIP MANDELSTAM

Palace Square

~~translated by Don Mager

The grand imperial pennant
And a motor car —from the capital's
Black water hole
Angel-columns ascended.

Through the dark arch, pedestrians
Disappeared like swimmers,
Or in the square, like in water,
They mutely splashed about.

Only there, where it firmly shone,
The black-yellow rag was enraged¹
As if streaked across the air
Was the double eagle's bile.

OSIP MANDELSTAM

The black and yellow flag with the imperial eagle was the flag of the Tsars.

Untitled

~~translated by Don Mager

Fame is unsightly, when one is alive.
It does nothing to raise one up.
One must not establish archives

Nor tremble over one's manuscripts.

The aim of creation—self-reflection,
Not hoopla, not grand success.
To be a parable on any old tongue
Is infamy and nothingness.

But one must live without pretense
So that at the end of ends
You bring to yourself love of expanse
And hear the future beckoning.

And one must renounce the spaces
Of fate. Not on the center of pages
Are a whole life's chapters and places
Spelled out—but the marges.

Become immersed in uncertainty,
Conceal your footsteps in its bog,
Just as one is unable to see
Whole districts in a pitch dark fog.

Others, with living tracks, will trace,
Pound for pound, your itinerary.
But you yourself must not divorce
Astonishment from victory.

And you must not, from any angle,
Betray your self-containment,
But be alive, alive and simple,
Alive and simple to the end.

BORIS PASTERNAK

Although sometimes claimed to be Pasternak's response to the Soviet Government's demand that he turn down the Nobel prize, this poem (1956) in fact predates the prize controversy by almost two years

The Imperfect Lovers

~~translated by Emilie Pons

“We won't talk about our parents,” they said. Simultaneously. Unless Camille said it to Leo or Leo to Camille. Then, addressing me they added: “There're only the three of us, you know.”

Simultaneously, or one after the other. Those two cultivated the art of leading you astray; it took me a while to understand. Didn't they resemble each other like two drops of water? They were sixteen, and I was nineteen. It was ancient history, five or six years ago. They wanted me to write their biography, since I couldn't be their twin. Having the three of us together inside their beautiful parchment notebook, the three of us bound by our childish words. I suppose that's what I wanted, too.

“Our parents don't exist, period.” All right. Yet we'll see, my sweethearts, who, between you and me, will be the winner. Because there's a battle between us now, a posthumous fight, I'll explain it later; I'm in too much of a hurry right now. Time is linked to words, how many seconds for a written word, how many seconds between words, how many hours between sentences, and weeks between pages? I don't know. I'm stupid, and quite young, younger than they are, even though they are three years younger than I. They confused me terribly; that's what they did, but I'll do them in.

“We won't talk about our parents,” I said they had said. I replaced “forget about our parents” by “we won't talk about our parents,” I don't care if they don't like it. “Forget about our parents,” that's what they must have said, as well as “don't fuck with us, there're only the three of us, everything else is bullshit.” Is that important? They also happened to be polite in the most refined way, and they didn't seem that much alike towards the end. Now they're messing around with me in retrospect. Are the exact words important? I wonder. I might

make some changes later. And I'm very happy to be starting my project (my report, my story, my thing?) with precisely their parents. Anyway.

I was in Bamako that winter, hanging out with my own mother, who had been sent there by our town's France-Mali Association. That winter, that is to say several years ago already. I had seen a flyer announcing a meeting between several Francophone writers at the Palace of Culture. I left my mother at the market of charms, drums and skins and took a cab there. Better getting informed before throwing myself completely into my project. Getting informed retrospectively, because at the time I had written nothing, except for my high school homework as well as what the twins were forcing me to write in their fucking fancy notebook. But I'm getting ahead of myself again, the notebook came later. Never mind Mali for now.

What I wanted most of all was to get into a car, go away alone somewhere. My mother could understand that, maybe she wanted to hang out on her own as well, without having to drag along a big surly guy. The cab's door held on by a single iron strip. The wheels were about to fall off, everything jumping and jolting along, the windows stuck, nothing to grab hold of, jolts, bumps and potholes, and yet it was moving, I was mesmerized. Something jerry-rigged, repaired, that was even speeding, speeding crazily. Like me, I suppose. That cab was jostling my head, a real fever in the brain. I could have crossed the whole African continent, but the cabdriver dropped me on the yellow road.

Now, the writers' congress.

I arrived in the middle of a round-table discussion. There were five or six speakers plus the moderator, facing an audience under a tent. It was a small crowd, but everyone was

talking at the same time. Words were buzzing in the heat. A sort of fight broke out between two of the writers, I couldn't tell what it was about -- I was falling into one of my fits of anxiety when a young woman signaled she wanted to talk. She was sitting with the writers, but nobody seemed to be paying attention to her. A pretty girl, very dark, Indian maybe, I'm not sure. She raised her hand. The speakers became aware of her presence and stopped talking: they were polite, I noticed, and suddenly I felt a twist in my stomach.

What was she saying exactly? My mind wandered away. I was feeling ashamed, one doesn't say things like that. The things she said are for kids like me, writers don't think, don't talk like that. She had said "That's all very fine, but the only thing I really have in mind when I start writing is: am I going to manage to write a hundred pages? You never talk about that! It's tough to write a hundred pages!" I did not need to worry about her, she was so funny, so perfectly funny that people started laughing. Then a gust of wind blew and the tent started shaking above our heads. A rope became loose on the side, and the whole top fell down, stopping just above our heads like a reversed parachute, billowing smoothly in the still blowing wind. It was a lovely moment.

I wish something like this would happen when I address my audience. Not the lawyer, tutor, judge, psychologist, the whole congregation of them all, whom I hope never to see again, but the real audience, the audience of the soul to which everyone aspires. The girl was called Natacha something, Natacha followed by a complicated name that I couldn't remember. But I could find it again if I wanted to, if I weren't in such a hurry. It was in Bamako, in Mali, yes I've already said that, my first experience as a writer.

A writer by proxy, because, immediately thereafter, I was by that girl's side, so to speak. As soon as she raised her hand, as soon as the others, flabbergasted, turned towards her, I became Natacha.

PIERRETTE FLETIAUX (French, contemporary)

Meeting Husishanren at Zhongnan Mountain and Drinking Wine at His Home

~~translated by Cui Ying

Dusk falls over emerald mountains,
While the moon accompanies my way back.
Looking back at the trail I have passed,
I find it like a jade belt lying on grey dark.
I go to my friend's home among farmlands,
And his kid opens their simple gate for us.
Walking through green bamboos on the quiet path,
My clothes whisk by green plants.
Joyous conversations makes me fully relax,
With nice wine adding color to our happiness.
Sing songs in tone with sounds of pine trees,
When the party is over stars begin to decrease.
I am drunk, yet my friend is full of joys;
We just forget selfish scheming common between humans.

LI BAI (Tang Dynasty)

Robertino

~~self-translation by Olga Zaslavsky

Nina was often in bed, feeling sick. During her prolonged bed rest, her parents moved her from her own room to their living room, which also served as a bedroom. Nina's room, which she loved as if it were part of her own flesh and blood, a hundred square feet in size, resembled a dark intestine, cluttered with books and games from different periods of Nina's childhood. The games were primarily for her guests, mostly boys, who usually outnumbered the girls at her birthday parties; sometimes, those same boys would drop by her apartment for scrimmage in the long, also intestine-like, hallway.

It was her parents' makeshift living room/bedroom, however, that ruled this dark Leningrad apartment of the 1970's. The room, filled with light-colored, Romanian furniture, which added a few bright tones to its otherwise lackluster appearance, had one window, looking out on a grey courtyard. At the center of the room stood a stereo player, which Nina's father turned on each evening in the manner of quiet solemnity. Nina's father collected mostly classical LPs, giving preference to vocal recordings. Years before Nina's birth, her father had dreamt of becoming a singer.

During various infectious illnesses, which Nina had experienced almost every two months between the ages of 7 and 11, she was reading Italian and Russian libretti, which her father had read first, following his favorite operas. While reading, Nina was living in the dramatic world of opera plots: she felt sorry for the poor Cio-Cio-San from Puccini's opera "Madame Butterfly"; the poor woman had killed herself after having been abandoned by a naval officer, Pinkerton. She was moved to tears by Tatiana from Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin." Tatiana's pleading question, "Are you my guardian angel, or a treacherous seducer?" addressed in a letter to a morose and enigmatic Onegin, often made Nina's heart sink. She imagined Tatiana looking pale and wearing a white dress.

On some nights, when Nina's fever jumped especially high, she imagined herself communicating with those characters. She felt spellbound by the old countess from Tchaikovsky's "The Queen of Spades." The old countess, her father had mentioned once, became the reason for the insanity and eventual death of Herman, an impoverished young army officer, vying for the hand of the countess's niece, Lisa. Herman tried in vain to obtain the secret combination in an old card game that would win him a fortune. The old countess, also known as the Queen of Spades, was the only person who knew the winning hand -- "The three, the seven, and the Ace of Spades" -- screamed Herman from the record player in a desperate resolve, after he belatedly extorted this information from the morbidly frightened

countess. At that moment, Nina felt that she was standing next to Herman, breathing the stale scent of the Queen of Spades' perfumed wig.

This world of sounds, quite loud at times, her father had a penchant for a volume turned up high, served as a frequent substitute for the voices of her school friends, whom she missed, lying on a wide sofa in the living room/bedroom, a brighter and cleaner substitute for her own room.

One day Nina experienced a whole new set of emotions. On a warm weekday evening in 1971, her father took out the LP of a young Italian singer, Robertino Loretti. The jacket of the LP showed a bright smiling, toothy dark-haired boy of about 12. From a long jacket description, pointed out to her by her father, she learned that the boy, who looked vaguely familiar, came from Rome, from a large family. But, her father went on explaining, the Italians didn't care for the boy's singing that much; the old Neopolitan folk songs that he sang had long been out of fashion in the country of his birth. Robertino's popularity – she liked thinking of his first name only – grew out of Denmark, and then spread into Russia. Nina's father mentioned how he had to order this record through a friend. Listening intently to this record, Nina suddenly understood that this Italian boy's singing had nothing to do with what children should be singing about. His inviting tone and the words of the songs -- Nina could follow them in translation, carefully provided by her father -- were about things out of her range, something almost forbidden. For some time, she herself loved to sing his "A Duck and a Poppy," not realizing the point of this deceptively cheerful song. "Believe it or not, but that's how it was," Nina's thin voice could be heard in the apartment; she was singing in Russian, Karaoke-style, following the Italian original. The original, though, told a sad story: a little duck of humble origins fell in love with an aristocratic poppy. The ending was hopeless for the duck, yet the deceptively cheerful tune of the song provided some consolation and gave Nina hope that, maybe some day, the duck would find its happiness.

Nina admired Robertino's voice. Sometimes, she imagined him as an old and dear friend, sometimes, she imagined herself in the recording -- she found Robertino's voice a little feminine. Robertino himself, she thought, would have to be cheerful and tan and completely out of her reach.

Robertino emerged in the evenings, thanks to her father, who played his LP. Robertino's voice enveloped Nina with its velvety yet boyish sound, and eventually disappeared. Waking up in the morning, Nina could only dream of Robertino's evening return. During the day, Nina would abandon herself to daydreaming. She imagined herself strolling hand-in-hand with Robertino; she imagined his toothy, somewhat impish smile.

Several times a week, Nina's mother gave music lessons in the very room where Nina invoked her meetings with Robertino. Normally, Nina was watching the backs of both Mother and her students. This way, she had ample room for imagining the facial expressions of the students, when the mother explained this or that musical nuance in her strict teacher voice. Occasionally, her mother would also teach Nina to play the piano. But Mother's suddenly unfamiliar voice scared Nina, and she refused to play. Now that her mother's strictness was directed at others, Nina was happy to relax and perform her favorite job of daydreaming. Nina particularly noticed one student -- he had dark hair and especially white teeth. At some point Nina decided that if she had ever met Robertino, he would probably look like that dark-haired boy.

This "Robertino" was 12. Mother said that he was from a working-class family. Occasionally, the boy's father would show up during the lessons and say, "Dimitry, practice hard. If you do that, you won't have to slave on the assembly line like me."

The voice from the pantry

~~translated by Claudia Serea

Come on, dare to open the pantry's door. Here you can find everything you want, and more. Inside the jars, the seasons pass softly: ripe cherries, sweetened by the lovers' ears; rose petals that dripped the spring into ever-happy sherbets; even the winter sifted through sugared orange peel that napped too long in the afternoons under the Christmas tree. Fall, brought home by your father in his brown briefcase, ripens on the top shelf: a row of quinces he received from someone named Gica. The far-away memories are caught in spider webs behind the jars with pickles. Old Man Todor and Auntie Lena passed through here and never returned. Because I, The Big Crossing, hide here, behind the jars, my muzzle dirtied by preserves, craving *zacusca* and tearing at the cellophanes. Come on, don't be scared, crack open the pantry's door just a little... One day, you too will pass through here... And then you'll see the light inside the darkness. Auntie Lena and Old Man Todor both saw it, and you will see it, too, one day... because the fruits inside the jars are pregnant with sun and they always give birth to light. Time is uncertain here, and, if you press your ear against the jars, you can still hear the wind through the branches, rocking the fruits to ripen in the evenings with full moon. You can even see the day when your mother saw an ant climbing slowly-slowly on your grandmother's leg. The pantry is where the sun sets and rises, where the roosters sing morning and midnight at the same time, and your mother's wrinkles become maps for your teen years. If you open the pantry's door, be sure to wear your sunglasses. There is so much light inside.

ADINA DABIJA (Romanian, contemporary)

The box

~~translated by Claudia Serea

I put it on the table and look at it.
If I look carefully, I can only see a box.
If I squint, I still see the box
that holds inside a smaller box,
and, inside it, the smallest possible box,
and, inside it, the tiniest, impossible, most ridiculous box
hides THE BIGGEST WHITE BOX.
Inside it, people sing and dance.
There is a fantastic amusement park
where I see my mother and me, really small.
We laugh, eat cotton candy, and try all the rides—Whoo-hooooo!

The bigger the belly grows,
the smaller the dream.
First comes the shadow, then the bird.
It's not the bird's shadow, but the shadow itself is a bird.
The matter dreams in order to exist.

ADINA DABIJA

Twist 2

~~translated by Claudia Serea

My afternoons are long and I spend them hiding
behind my legs,
lazy, with a leaf between my lips, thinking
I'm probably flushed red.
Should I light up a cigarette? Now,
or five minutes later?
On this paper bag it says "Frank" or "Flour?"
These are the only moments when I can think of such things.
In the next room, my mother waits
for me to get married,
but, in afternoons like this, I swear I never will.
I feel so good and fall asleep
and only my thoughts squeeze between my thighs.

Suddenly, the phone, your voice
threatens me with a night out to the movies.
What rush, lipstick, dress, hands!
And I was so content before, with my monstrously soft self,
seeing red through my hair and not seeing any way out.
Now I clearly see it, but I don't want to.
I keep my eyes shut and catch your arm,
careful, there is a stepping stone.
I can't kiss you, until I realize
the earth is round:
when I run from you, thinking I can move on,
I fall back into your arms.

ADINA DABIJA

The Ruin

~~translated by Crisman Cooley

Fate broke this well-made wall;
city courtyards cracked giants' rockwork to wreckage.
Rooftops fallen, towers toppled,
gates gutted, lime frost hung,
sheered storm shelters crashed and crumbling,
age-eaten. Earth grasps
the town's masters and men, decaying, departed,

gripped by the grave, a hundred generations
our nation once knew. This wall has worn
stains of scarlet and gray, a conflict of fiefdoms,
withstanding all storms till it finally fell.
The stonework stays steadfast in heaps,
rocks unmoved by ruthlessness, but time's tumult
grinds them grimly to powder, breaks and pulverizes them,
wears them with water, till the stone comes to shine.
The skill is exposed the ancient will of the work
where the wall fell, earthrind gives way,
the mind of its makers is swiftly unsheathed,
around council circle rings, noble minds bound
by well-rooted wires that wound the walls together.
The buildings were bright, the bath halls ubiquitous,
beneath the great hall's horn gables a host often gathered,
many in the meadhall feasted joyfully
till they were unwound by dire destiny.
Death spread wide by pestilence among people
that swept them away like an enemy army;
their castle became a deserted waste land,
a corrupted city. Rebuilders died,
interred in turn. Death desolates
this porphyrian expanse where tiles have tumbled
roof beams lay bare. The ruin returns to earth
broken to barrows, where warriors once waited,
gold bearing, glad-minded, spangled with splendor,
wine-wassailed and proud in war regalia gleaming;
their gaze fell on gold, silver, upon precious gems,
on land, on lodestones, on troves of bright treasure
on this shining city and its far-reaching realm.
Where stone houses stood, a stream hotly spilled
water fervid come from afar; a wall enclosed all
close to its core, where the baths were
held hot at its heart. What a lavish life!
They let it pour, despite winter weather,
streams of hot water over gray stone...

[...]

When they came back cold and rime-hung from the ringed sea,
their homecoming was hot there in the baths.

[...]

... How kingly a thing
to have a house in so great a city

... Author: Anonymous (8th Century, originally appeared in the Exeter Book, a collection of Old English poems.)

Nayla's Time

~~translated by Mike Garcia

Nayla glanced at the watch on her right wrist. It was only five in the evening, but the sky was so black. The sun had long since set below the horizon. She waxed gloomy like dull light from a dark moon. Sudden anxiety seized her. Had her watch died? Then what time was it really? She checked the clock in her car: five in the evening. Her cell phone indicated five in the evening too. She punched in the number *103*. She heard a recorded voice on the other side: “The time is seventeen o’clock, zero minutes, and twenty-three seconds.” Then which was right? The timekeeper or the clock of nature? Nayla drove faster. Her palms were moist with sweat, making the steering wheel slippery. She had to find someone who could give her the exact time. But if she were to stop and ask someone she would be losing precious time. She still had far to go to get to where she wanted to be. She didn’t want to lose any time, just as she didn’t want to run out of time to do lots of things that she had not yet done. At last she gave in. She pulled over alongside a group of kids who were hanging out in front of a cigarette stand and asked them the time. But just as she had guessed would happen, they each gave the same response: five in the evening, though there were some differences about the exact minute. One said it was five past five, another that it was three past five, and yet another that it was seven past five. Nayla was sorry that she had wasted her time asking a foolish question that she was sure she already knew the answer to; that is, that it was five in the evening. It meant she still had plenty of time. Before her wristwatch turned into a broom, the car into a pumpkin, and she to dust.

It’s hard to say precisely when Nayla began to not be friends with time anymore. Time was like an assassin stalking her and spying on her in the dark. Ready to pull a knife to her beating chest, a beating that she had already forgotten the sensation of. A rhythmic pulse that a year ago greeted her with an offer of eternal friendship—almost eternal—until the assassin suddenly appeared, with a dagger. Before, Nayla had been good friends with time. When the wedding band wound impressively around her ring finger. When there was a gentle kick inside her belly. Breast-feeding. Bathing the baby. Making love in the evening. Getting breakfast ready early in the morning. Recreation. Taking the kids to school. Helping with household chores. Scolding the maid. Getting out the dusty photo album. Slicing carrots. Going to the doctor. Calling friends. Praying in the dark. Giving thanks for a nearly perfect life. A life that she had always craved passionately. Back then time was a helper, a tool facilitating her daily activities. Guiding her as the wheel that drove her family’s happiness. Telling her when it was time to plant flowers at her parents’ grave, and the graves of her grandfather, grandmother, and ancestors. Buying presents for Christmas, birthdays, and Valentine’s Day. Sending an SMS text message to the breadwinner so he’d be on time for dinner. Figuring out the easiest dishes to make so she wouldn’t be late picking up the kids from their private lessons. Making love by the calendar rhythm method, to know when to pull out. Time wasn’t something to worry about. Because time was just a moving wheel that turned 3,600 ticks an hour, 24 hours a day: the routine mechanical motion of life, rolling along the open road. But now so much had been forgotten. The sound of a typewriter echoing in an empty room. The dim roar of workers in an office building cafeteria. Seeing and being seen at the Plaza Senayan mall. Sighing to friends about unrequited love. Slapping the

face of an offensively rude man at the discothèque. Wiping away tears. Daydreaming. Reading pulp fiction. Eating fried rice with goat meat in a noisy group in the car while parked by the side of the road. Cooking *Indomie* brand curried chicken noodles. Watching the sun set. And Formula One or the World Cup in a sports bar. Looking radiantly into her lover's eyes. Brushing his thigh with a trembling hand while placing the napkin in her lap. Her heart racing, waiting for the phone to ring. Choosing, her heart throbbing, a Missing You card that wasn't too tacky. And not waiting for a fitting occasion to give it to him on. Her chest pounding as she decided on the best dress for each date with her fiancé. Feeling each beat of her heart while waiting for a compliment. Making love with feeling, heart, bosom, soul, hands, feet, breasts, vagina, neck, back, armpits, eyes, nose, mouth, cheeks, body...pulsing. What had been forgotten was the flow of time within the sea of throbbing, the ocean of trembling, the heaven of expectations.

Probably Nayla did not mean to forget; she was just unaware. She was only conscious of her weariness and had not yet returned to her senses. She had been hypnotized by the side-to-side swing and rhythmic ticking of the clock's pendulum. It froze her. Made her tongue go mute. Her heart turn to stone. Her imagination wither. Occasionally her imagination would rebel and fly as she slept. Soaring with the birds and flapping her wings with the butterflies. Riding the whales in the open sea. Bungee jumping. Crossing rapids. Reading *The Adventures of Tintin* comic books. Drinking tea in the clouds while discussing the short stories of Anton Chekov with her late father and asking her deceased mother which is more expensive, polished diamonds or fancy diamonds. Being Arnold Schwarzenegger and foiling the terrorists who were going to crash planes into the World Trade Center. Swallowing a durian seed. Eating *rambutan* fruit. Seeing the Cirque du Soleil. Watching *NSYNC and being called to the stage to get a kiss from Justin Timberlake. Boxing Mohammad Ali. Beating Michael Jordan. Stealing Victoria Beckham's husband. Editing the work of Gabriel García Márquez. Being abducted by aliens. Having a small bookstore in Ismail Marzuki Park. Reading poems with the president of poetry, Sutardji Calzoum Bachri. Rushing to the center of a heart-pounding pulsation.

But her dreams, too, were limited by time. The pulsation abruptly dispersed when she heard the maid knocking on the bedroom door. A cock crowed. Birds chirped. A bright shaft of sunlight broke through the window. And she heard the ringing of the alarm when the big hand pointed to the number *twelve* and the short hand pointed to the *six*.

The sound of the alarm clock was the same sound as that of the doctor informing her that a malignant form of cancer had been detected in her uterus. The sound of the alarm was the same as that of the doctor sentencing her to live, at the most, one more year. The sound of the alarm was the same as that of the doctor saying there was no chance of recovery. The sound of the alarm was the sound that snapped her out from under the hypnotic spell of the pendulum of time—past, present, and future.

All humans have been sentenced to death, without ever knowing when the sentence would be carried out. So Nayla didn't know whether to feel threatened or thankful. At least she no longer needed to ask when the execution would take place. But was the one year that the doctor meant 12 months, 52 weeks, or 365 days from now? How about if the one year started from when the cancer first began to metastasize? Or the week before she went to the doctor? Or perhaps at the exact second that the doctor said one year? How much time had she wasted already? Where should she start counting

from?

It made her so dizzy that she saw stars. Her tummy began to hurt with each sound the clock made. The ticking deafened her. One, ten, one hundred, one thousand, ten thousand, one hundred thousand, one million seconds hounded and besieged her ears wherever she went. Her eyes were compelled to watch the coming and going of hurried feet, an impatient driver honking his horn, students going to class when the bell rang, the hands of millions of employees punching in their time cards, the pushing and shoving to get on the bus, the bodies jammed on top of the train cars—no one wanting to be left behind. Everyone has to get where they're going on time. No one has the time anymore to stop for a second and notice the dew before it drips to the ground. The sun shining, but not too bright. The clouds that look like pearls, or the shadow puppet Semar, or an elephant. A budding flower. A lame dog. An ant trampled into the ground. Rice ripening in the paddy. Birds on the rooftop making love. Everyone marching forward as if they weren't touching the ground.

Since that moment, her alarm had never stopped ringing.

She wanted to delay time's passage, to stretch out the day so that night would never arrive. She wanted to carry away the moon so that the sun would always shine. She wanted to take a hammer to the clock so that her alarm would be silent. She wanted to postpone death.

But Nayla was always late herself. She was always on the losing side, defeated by a routine that refused to give in.

She began to feel that her obligations were a burden. She began to envy people who could go for a leisurely walk while holding hands. Or people sunning themselves by the pool reading the paper, while she hustled to prepare breakfast, hot water, and school clothes. Jostling through the crowd in the hustle and bustle, noise, and sweat of the open market. Making sure it wasn't yet time to have the air conditioner cleaned. Paying the phone and electric bills each month. Feeding the fish. Giving constant reminders to the maid who hadn't done what she had been asked to do. Going to aerobics. Being a good listener when her husband complained about work. Racking her brain trying to take care of monthly food and clothing needs. Checking her disappointment when her children no longer paid attention when they were supposed to.

And yet there was always something. Always something that was still not perfect.

The cobwebs on the ceiling. Using the phone too much. Breasts that were starting to sag. A vagina that had lost its suppleness. Exhaustion to the point of snoring in her sleep. A faded school uniform. Poor money management. Too much wastefulness. Not paying enough attention. Not sensitive enough. Too little time.

Time...

Time...

Time...

Time.....?

She didn't even have the time to indulge herself. No time to get together with her friends. To shop for jewelry. To go out clubbing at night. To read more than twenty pages of a book in a day. No more watching films on the big screen at Studio Twenty One. No more doing any of the things that used to be fun for her.

She began to notice the beating of her heart. Her very being trembled. She wanted to smack her husband when he took the children's side when they were naughty. She wanted to belch loudly in front of her in-laws. She wanted to speed without wearing her safety belt. She wanted to color her hair like Dennis Rodman. She wanted to sunbathe nude on the beach. She wanted to say that she liked making love doggy style.

She wanted to raise—two of each—a pet dog, cat, pig, penguin, panda, and bear. She wanted to quit drinking *sari rapet*, and *jamu* to slim down her waist. She wanted to eat two big bowls of *Betawi* noodle soup at one sitting. She wanted to stop restricting herself to eating only fruits and vegetables at night.

What now betrayed her so that she no longer felt completely guilty about the mesmerizing beating of her heart? What now allowed her to admit that she had long been wasting time? Was life given as a precious gift so that people would have no choice but to do good? And why did these questions come up only after time's executioner had already stretched his hand out to her?

Maybe life is like a car with a full tank of gas. It is only when the driver realizes that the fuel is almost all gone that she starts thinking about whether she really needs to use the air conditioner—to prolong the journey, to get to where she wants to go. Nayla stepped on the gas. Chasing the opportunity to kneel and ask forgiveness for the sins that she regretted she hadn't had the time to commit—before her wristwatch turned into a broom, the car into a pumpkin, and she to dust....

Jakarta, 4 March 2002, 9:14:07 PM

DJENAR MAESA AYU (Indonesia, contemporary)

And a Tree Comes Along

~~translated by Alireza Jamalimanesh

And a tree comes along
A river of trees
The green wave of bliss
Pounds on my chest
In red you are dressed
You are the seal of the burning year
Time rests
Beyond the abyss of lights
The sky is clouded by birds
Their beaks bring night
Their wings carry the day.
Planted in the crest of light
Between firmness and vertigo,
You are
The lucid balance.

(Farsi) SHAHRZAD NASIRI (2007).

Letters From Berlin

30. May. 1945, Wednesday

Dearest Peter!

The last few weeks have been almost too much to bear. There is tremendous physical and emotional stress, the bad food, cooked with the water from the pit² in the yard that could likely have been the very water in which a woman has taken her life. At first we only had soup and two pieces of bread per day. It is a bit better now, because now we receive 500 grams of bread each day. The bread is fresh but something to put on it is missing. Canned goods are sometimes available but only enough for one slice of bread. And only as of two days ago, we started to receive rations of lard.

With the constant draft, because walls and windows are broken, and with all the bad food, nearly everyone is sick. Almost everyone has stomach problems. Others have sore throats and many have angina³. For four weeks now, I have had stomach problems myself until finally I was not even able to get out of bed, running a fever of 102.3 degrees F. For nearly three days I ran this high fever, however today, for the first time, it is down to 98.6 degrees again. I've decided to stay in bed in order to get rest thoroughly.

These times are so dreadful for us. We live from one fear to the next. And we hear nothing positive. There is still no mail service. There are several organizations that do stop by from time to time. But I must say, people have become so vulgar and agitated. I don't know if it is only the scum of mankind that survives a war, or if it is that everyone now believes they must sink to their lowest level. Women sit around squabbling and gossiping about the most vulgar things.

² A pit had been dug into the yard for the purpose of collecting water in case the lazarett were to catch fire.

³ The German word here, "Angina", denotes a disease caused by an inflammation of the throat, characterized by spasmodic suffocation.

Our lazarett has now become the Civilian Hospital (the hospital on Heerstrasse). Every Wednesday and Saturday night we put on a variety show. But you can no longer say that things have “double entendres”, rather it is at best a “single entendre.” Mutti⁴ says the sort of behavior is so typical of postwar psychosis. At every corner and in every bar you can see women hanging around with Russian soldiers.

Besides this, there is the cleanup work to do. All the piles of rubble that have been lying in the streets from the bombings need to be hauled off and then dumped into the craters where the completely bombed-out houses once stood. Every civilian is required to work. The PG's⁵ are required to work all day long; from early in the morning until late at night, while for everyone else, the work hours are only from 2:00p.m. until 4:00p.m. It is also possible that you may simply be pulled aside and forced to work until you are let go again. At first the Russians stole our bicycles much more often than now. They are really not supposed to do this anymore, but there are still incidents now and again, even though we all have certificates of ownership. On the other hand they are very respectful of the Red Cross. The Russian is in truth, a quite sensitive man, although rather dumb. One of them traded his much better bicycle for that of one of our nurses—knowing exactly what he was doing—because he could see that she was not going to be able to ride her man's bicycle with its cross-bar, much longer.

* * * * *

⁴ German for “mother”.

⁵ *Parteigenossen*. It is the name given to the official members of the NSDAP, the Nazi party.