

Ezra closes this volume-year with a very special feature: Lucina Schell's interview with translator Nesreen Akhtarkhavari. The interview is a fascinating look at the departed Al-Sboul, and serves as a review of his *Desert Sorrows* (data at the end of the interview). Hats off to the indomitable Schell for this coup.

Another feature is Willis Barnstone's new translation (work in progress) from the Hebrew, of the Song of Songs. Because of its length, we are making this a Special Edition, along with some legendary editions from the past, findable under **Archive**.

We break with tradition and print a sample of the original Bengali (Debadrita Bose's translation), of Indranil Ghosh. A good dose of prose colors this issue the way we like it; enjoy the 17th century mountebank "Tabarin." Another treat is up-and-coming translator Kate Gladsky; Ezra is embarrassed to have known so little about the great Mexican Homero Aridjis.

Look for the foundational North African writer Abdelkébir Khatibi (*Tattooed Memory*) in the next issue!

Mark Polizzotti was quoted (in a book review, latest issue of *Translation Review*) saying that a translation emerges like a photograph—gradually developing in a darkroom. How Ezra wishes our technology could make the pages of this scroll slowly materialize in a silver nitrate background! Failing that, you'll enjoy these works the way you always enjoy poetic writing. Their sense, their urgency, will gradually emerge between various points, along various vectors, as if the writing were not linear, were not syntax, were not one language alone...

Interview with Translator Nesreen Akhtarkhavari and selected poems from *Desert Sorrows* by Tayseer al-Sboul

On the Fourth of July weekend, I met with Nesreen Akhtarkhavari in her office at DePaul University, where she directs the Arabic Studies Program, to talk about her translations of renowned Jordanian poet Tayseer al-Sboul. While reading the poems in Desert Sorrows, I recognized the painful lucidity and searing compassion that aligns Tayseer with other writers who plumbed the depths of the human condition, like the Argentine poet I've spent the past few years translating, Miguel Ángel Bustos. The fraught emotional journeys of writers like Tayseer offer unparalleled insight to their readers, and making his words available in English is a great achievement.

~ Lucina Schell

Lucina Schell: This collection of Tayseer al-Sboul's poetry is titled Desert Sorrows, and beautiful photographs of the desert are used to divide the different sections. What did the desert mean to Tayseer?

Nesreen Akhtarkhavari: Native people are connected to their place, to nature, to their environment, and for a Bedouin, the desert is home. Tayseer was born in 1939 at the edge of the

desert in Jordan. He travelled and lived in many places, but the desert represented to him purity, tradition, and authenticity in a polluted and corrupt world. The poem “Desert Sorrows,” which he also chose as the title of the collection, was based on a walk with a number of friends at the edge of the desert, saying goodbye to one of their friends who was leaving the country. I love this poem and it is what inspired me to translate his work. I love the images, the words he chose, his ability to connect the past, the present, the people, and the place with creativity and skill that took me back to the same desert I knew, but changed my perception of it forever. I loved the way Tayseer saw his journey as an extension of the journey of the voices from the past, of the Bedouins who walked the land, of the legacy of tradition, just like the Native Americans feel about their land.

Desert Sorrows (1)

From time before time,
in the darkest caves of eternity,
it stretched through the Arabian Desert,
flowing like a dream, magic, melancholy,
like the nights of Scheherazade,
crossed dune tops,
 traversed ravines.
From time before time,
the grains of sand
drank the sorrow in that voice,
entered it in their folds,
returned it to me,
flowing like a dream, magic, melancholy.
As I breathe in its sorrows,
the voice in the folds of my chest
revives my longing for him.
I see him,
a Bedouin with hopeless steps mapped in the desert,
lonely, waiting for traces of dewdrops,
from time before time.
And yet,
once that longing awakens in my heart
for more nearness and touch,
and once the call for confession clamors
in the chambers of my soul,
when I am startled to find
my death in each fleeting moment,
when I know that I am

part of the warmth of the others,
I imagine seeing him again,
a Bedouin with hopeless steps mapped in the desert,
walking, the glare of the sun in his eyes,
the sand promising more sand,
the stretch of the desert—silence,
the torment of departure.
He sang.
His voice stretched through the Arabian Desert,
leaving the sorrow of his songs in the sand.

LS: When Scheherazade is introduced in “Desert Sorrows,” I think American readers might tend to gloss over it as this trope—we all know it as this ‘exotic story,’ the Arabian Nights—not this horrible situation in which this woman has to keep herself alive through her wits. Later, in the poem, “What No One Told Us about Scheherazade,” I came to understand better how he’s using that story in “Desert Sorrows” and how he relates to her.

NA: This poem, in my opinion best illustrates Tayseer’s sensitive nature, and the depth of his consciousness. He looks beyond the common, senses the reality of Scheherazade’s life, feels her pain, and sees it in the context of the pain and oppression of his nation. Scheherazade is commonly introduced in Western culture as the heroine who conquered the king with her wit, ignoring in most cases her true suffering that Tayseer recognizes, deeply feels, and retells, her anticipation “*is the day going to come again?*” This poem demonstrates Tayseer thinking beyond the ordinary, beyond the surface. Scheherazade is his friend, his equal, she tells her story only to him, and with that, he feels obligated to retell it.

What No One Told Us about Scheherazade

Scheherazade,
why did your tales return me to the forgotten past
through a tunnel of illusions that led to certitude?
They made my heart heavy, loaded down to my side with a secret
I couldn’t understand
of your long mysterious nights.
For a thousand nights,
every night
your only hope was to last through the night.

A story told to us since we were young
carried us to the land of genies
through storms and shipwrecks on the sea.

We loved you,
we loved you so,
stayed up, night after night,
eagerly asking:
What happens at the end?
Shahryar pardoned you after a thousand nights.
We were elated!
In my homeland, where the eyes of a child and an old man are the same,
hope feeds on the promise of victory.

My Scheherazade,
my Scheherazade, my friend!
Whatever was said was said.
But you whispered the truth to me:
For a thousand nights,
every night,
your only hope was to last through the night.
So when the cock crowed,
announcing to the world the birth of the morning,
you slept with death in your bed.
For a thousand nights,
the light of youth was extinguished from your eyes,
all flavors became the same flavor,
the bitter like the sweet.
After that, it was morning, but was not.
Only the memories of a young girl,
how different from that was Scheherazade!
My Scheherazade,
this lie deceived the ears for generations,
was fixed in the mind of history for centuries:
Shahryar pardoned Scheherazade after a thousand nights.
So it remains—
in my homeland, where the eyes of a child and an old man are the same,
where hope feeds on the promise of victory.
When winter clouds the horizon,
we entertain ourselves with your passionate tales
and sing about victory—
a victory that never was and never will be,
under the watchful eyes of Shahryar.

LS: Not only does Tayseer connect with female literary figures, but his relationships with real women—his wife and others—are strongly represented across many of his poems. What is an ideal relationship for Tayseer?

NA: Tayseer demonstrates through many of the poems his relationships with women. They are his friends, his lovers, and his companions when no one else understands him. He looks for authenticity in his relationships with them just as he looks for it in all his other relationships, social and political. Even in that he struggles between modernity and tradition as in “A Gypsy.” He is progressive and traditional at the same time. He rejects the songs, the loud jazz music, and looks for Her naked, without makeup, connected to the sand and the soil of the land. He seeks a relationship with a woman, not any woman, a true relationship, that quenches his eternal thirst for pure love. He looks for perfection, which leads him to be constantly disappointed in himself and others as we see in many of the poems in the collection. Perhaps, the poem “Secrets,” is a vivid painting with words of his perception of true love, in consent, a harmony between the spiritual and physical, intertwined. It is truly erotic, but a respectable eroticism that celebrates love with passion and dignity, with equal participation from both partners. In this poem, he pushes cultural boundaries, but does not cross them. He utilizes metaphors employing the Arabic language itself — the table (feminine) intertwined with a chair (masculine) — to ease the reader from the familiar to the bold — a stem pulsing in a vase. Then he goes on to paint a vivid image of a union between a man and a woman, intense and divine.

Secrets

The chair reached for the shoulders of the table.

The flower dropped its stem in a vase.

The evening was still.

We listened.

We heard

a whisper in the folds of silence,
and timid steps.

Within us a secret hovered,
fear of the journey.

When she gestured in consent,
my veins pulsed with excitement,
seeing the one I had longed for.

The journey starts.

One hand wanders, then rests.

This evening is gentle.

The flower pumps inside the vase.

Silence suffers

the birth pains of movement.

Suddenly, the chair and the table,
their arms entwine.

The evening is held tightly
in a dress that grips it like a noose.

The world of secrets calls to me, and begs
that I untie it—
suffering, longing, and in pain.
I am in love.
The hissing of weaving over her body
repeats its yearning in my ears,
leads the movements of my hands
in the realm of flexibilities.
Colors in the corner, singing with joy,
a carnival of light,
woven transparent
like a rainbow.
I pray for you, daughter of light,
so generous this evening,
so unselfish in giving.
How often I have traveled this distance,
my hand reaping its fruits,
my mouth drinking from its flow.
But I am still thirsty, and my blood is hot
with a mad desire to be spilled in it.
So, listen to this banging
as it gushes strong in my arteries,
longs to live inside you.
It is from you
and to you.

LS: You have also translated Tayseer's novel You As of Today, My Homeland (Michigan State University Press, 2016) along with his short stories. Why did you decide to collaborate with Anthony Lee on the translation of his poetry? What was that experience like?

NA: I translated the novel, *You as of Today*, as a response to a request from the Jordanian Writers Society—they wanted the work to be available for English readers. When I read it again—I had read it a very long time ago in college—I rediscovered it and fell in love with it. I developed a close connection with the author, I understood him—this is essential, because when you translate a text, especially an intense literary work, you have to feel, understand, and contextualize every word that you are translating. I became emotionally involved in the events that took place and in the life the protagonist lived, because Tayseer made it transparent on paper. He made it seem so real that I sometimes felt that it was “*too private for me even to be there, watching and listening.*”

I always liked his poetry and translating the novel made me want to get to know him more through his verses since I can't know him more in person. I was not planning to translate all of his poetry because I'm not a poet, I'm a short story writer and translator, but I translated a number of his poems and taught them in my Arabic literature classes at DePaul University. I sent

one of the translations, “Desert Sorrows (1),” to Anthony Lee, a poet and friend. He liked the poem, but did not connect to the desert, being from California. But he thought the work was exciting, and asked to see more. I sent him another poem, and suddenly he just woke up and fell in love with it, and he kept saying *Can you send me more? Can you send me more?* So I sent him more poems, and then he kept saying, *Nesreen, you really should publish this*. From the poems I had sent him earlier, he had tweaked them a little bit, he would say *move this line here, or put a comma here, or do this here* because that would make it a more proper English poem. I said, *okay, I’ll publish it if you go over it and tweak it, where needed*. We enjoyed working together, so we worked on the rest of the poems in the collection. We were pleasantly surprised when the translation received mention in *World Literature Today* as one of the seventy-five most notable translations from 2015. This led to our collaboration on the translation of Rumi’s Arabic poems; *Love is my Savior* (Michigan State University Press, 2016), and the forthcoming second volume of Rumi’s Arabic poems, *The Wine of Reunion* that will be published in the early 2017.

Some people are surprised that I am collaborating with a poet who does not know Arabic, but I believe this is a strength because, like most of our English readers, he is not familiar with imageries and concepts unique to the Arabic language. This allows him to be sensitive to ideas, metaphors, and images that the reader will not be comfortable with in translation, while I as a native speaker of Arabic have a higher tolerance for them. For example, in Arabic we say “my liver” as a way of calling someone “my heart,” but liver isn’t used this way in English. I know not to use this, but other metaphors are more borderline. We have a system that we are comfortable with in which I translate the poem, I send it to him, he tweaks it, if needed, and sends it back to me, and we go back and forth until we’re both happy with the poem. It is an enjoyable and productive process that I believe produces accurate poems that are accessible to English readers without compromising the original poems’ meaning, mood, and intention.

LS: It seems from Anthony Lee’s introduction to the book that he really connected to this idea of winter—“my life is winter”—with the depression that Tayseer experienced. What do you think you each brought to the interpretation of his poetry?

NA: Anthony connected with Tayseer because he felt that they had common experiences with the world. He felt that Tayseer understood his challenges and perceived the world in a similar way. There is so much pain in Tayseer’s work because there was a lot of pain in Tayseer’s life and that is what Anthony identified with. He took the time to get to know him through his work in translation and was able to sense the joy and the agony in his life. He knew him as a poet and fell in love with him. I connected with Tayseer’s honesty, sense of originality, openness, and keen sense of justice. I loved the language and imagery, and identified with the place, the people, and the history he talks about. After translating his work, I felt that I knew him intimately. He became a friend. Anthony is enamored with Tayseer the poet and the man. We both appreciate that he wrote the way he felt, and celebrated that by translating his work so that more people get to know him as we knew him. His honesty, his transparency, his connection to his environment, his heightened awareness about himself, about place, and about others around him, is what attracted us to his work and to translating it.

It was a unique experience for me to see an African-American poet who does not speak Arabic, fall in love with a Jordanian poet from many years ago through his translated work—how our human experiences transcend place, transcend time, and cultures. This is the purpose of the *Arabic Language & Literature* series with Michigan State University Press: we want to bring literature that is honest and that really reflects what we have in common as humans. This is what will bring us together as people— when we realize we are not different, we all suffer, love, get depressed, get disappointed, enjoy life, and celebrate friendships. That is what unites us, and when we write about it with artistry, transparency, intense feeling, and skill, then it transcends time, place, nationalities, religion, and everything else.

LS: Tell me more about the Arabic Language & Literature series.

NA: We plan to publish works that tell the stories and bring forward voices from Arab countries that have not been heard before. We started by translating Jordanian writers, we hope to translate Syrian work, Yemeni, Bahraini, Gulf work, and others. We will be focusing on countries with literature less translated into English, or genres that have not been covered in translation. We are connecting to leagues and societies of writers in the countries themselves and asking them to give us feedback on what they think should be translated. We believe that it is important for the West to know the Arab world through the true sense of its writers—and not writers who are writing for the west, or promoting political agendas, but writers who are writing for themselves. Tayseer was not writing to please a specific audience or for his work to be translated. He was writing to document his experience and the experiences of his people. This is the kind of work we want to translate.

LS: What is your translation philosophy?

NA: I am very careful to stay true to the writer's voice, to his or her feelings, to his or her words, and convey them using his or her own words and expressions, as much as possible, except when those words in translation could distract from the intention of the writer. My first goal is for the voice of the writer to be clearly present. I want the translation to be as authentic as possible in bringing both the feelings, the images, the state of mind, and the words of the original writer. I believe that the translator is a cultural broker. He/she takes the content, the perspectives, and the culture and brings them to the reader as close to how they are in the original text, but in a language and form that could be understood and appreciated in translation.

I am a prose writer, and enjoy translating both poetry and prose, but I think it is useful to have a co-translator/editor who is a poet and a native speaker when translating poetry. I make sure that the translated poems are accurate, and having them read as acceptable English poems in translation becomes the role of the English-speaking poet. In most cases, especially when translating modern poetry, these edits are minimal.

LS: Tayseer's depression seems to have had both philosophical and political origins, in addition to being an innate part of his character, and it seems his despair over the 1973 events pushed him toward suicide. He connects the contemporary political situation in 1960s-1970s Jordan to history going very far back in that area, and mythology as well. How do you think that applies to what is going on today, or what can be learned from these connections that he makes?

NA: Tayseer constantly refers in his poems and prose to past events in Arab history and culture. He addresses politics with the same honesty and insight as he addresses the rest of the topics he tackles. His novel, *You as of Today, My Homeland* came out one year after the 1967 (Arab-Israeli) War, and was recognized by the prestigious A-Nahar Award for best Arabic novel of the year. It is an accurate depiction of the thinking and mood of the Arabs of East Jordan. He wrote it because he did not know what else he could do to express the flood of thoughts and emotions that his young nation was subjected to. He wrote it because it “bothered him.” His poems are another raw expression of his understanding of the circumstances of his people from the inside, and he had the courage to express them, without regard for the social and political implications that such honesty would trigger. For example, in his poem the *Elegy of the First Caravan*, he describes the Arab defeat in the 1967 War. When most politicians and writers of his time wrote about conspiracy and avoided acknowledging defeat, Tayseer described the defeat and devastation as he and his generation saw it, with boldness that is painful but accurate. However, with all of that, he was still hopeful—he called it the First Caravan, with more Caravans of victory to come.

Elegy of the First Caravan (excerpt)

The morning opened on those gentle eyes,
and by noon they were closed.
Twenty thousand lights put out.
Twenty thousand hands outstretched
and no warmth left to put a woman to bed.
Don't say:
Tomorrow
the victory will come!
No.
Sadness shreds the fabric of my heart,
reaches from my heart
to eternity.
The morning bleached white,
death appeared—
a destiny, a brother—
and settled in.
History frowned on a smiling people.

Without a fight,
men were slaughtered.
I know. If I wail for the destiny of my people,
even if the bereaved she-camels lend me their bellowing,
it is useless.
I tenderly send to old Sinai the weeping of my people.
No echo.
Twenty thousand eyeballs
picked out by vultures.
Don't conjure up a false victory.
I am telling you,
believe it:
There was no light there.
The night prevailed.
Let it be night. It is night.
No.
The horses did not shout victory at Yarmouk.
No.
The story of al-Qadesiyah is a worthless rumor
spread by the chatter of the Euphrates.
One horse left there—nothing else—
wandering with his head down,
tripping on his harness.

Tayseer's writings are artwork and historical records that at the same time can be used to understand the past and give us insight into the present and the future of people of the Arab world, especially youth. We need to understand our reality in order to make it better—masking it for ourselves and for the world is not going to help. It is very hard for us sometimes as Westerners to be so connected to the past, but for Arabs the past and present are a continuum. For the West to have an understanding and a meaningful dialogue with Arabs, they have to understand their perceptions that are grounded in their understanding of history. Without addressing this, it is hard to move forward. Tayseer, like many other Arab poets, connects the present moment to the past—he reminisces about Andalusia and Seville! When he became extremely desperate, he went back to reading the books of the past to try to understand: how did Arabs of the past get out of their dark places, to enlightenment? He was looking for solutions to the present through the experiences of the past.

Tayseer was young, depressed, and desperate when he took his life, and unfortunately, there are still many young, depressed, and desperate Arab youth today. We can read his work and try to understand, how is it that our youth become so desperate to kill themselves? Tayseer was occupied with his nation's pain and was constantly searching for a nation that he could be proud of, that he could identify with—he writes about wanting its symbol embossed in his body, engraved in his body. He looked for it in politics, in love, in history, but saw defeat and betrayal,

and in the end, he gave up! He felt as if he could not create anymore, he could not function, and he could not bring about change—and he ended his life.

Many Arab youth now are going through similar desperation, some are becoming nonfunctional, others are becoming extremist, so what are the circumstances that are leading to this, and are we listening to their desperation? Youth now are struggling with issues similar to what Tayseer struggled with at that time of conflict and change: the East-West conflict, trying to negotiate their place between tradition and modernity, and all of the forces of social and political change that are taking place, looking for their place in all of this, and in many cases, not finding it. Tayseer's work paints all of this in such a brilliant nakedness, it kind of stares you in the face and you have to be engaged with it. I believe that we have so much to learn from his work, so much to understand from how he came to desperation, and how certain circumstances today are forcing Arab youth into the same state of mind and soul that we hear in his poems.

Without a Title (2)

My friend, I
walk in a dream, aware
wander toward the edge of death.
A strange prophet I am, who left
with no destination in mind.
I will fall. Darkness will no doubt fill my soul,
a dead prophet, who has yet to reveal a verse.
You are my friend,
I know, but my path has changed.
I ask your forgiveness, just in case
we ever meet in a dream.
But you will rise the next day and forget.
How often you forget!
Peace Be Upon You.

This poem was written in 1973 and was found on Tayseer al-Sboul after his suicide.

LS: This is something that connects Tayseer with other great artists—not all artists of course, but this is a very universal trait, people who are more aware than others to the extent that it's very painful, and how do you hold that kind of awareness? I wonder if you think that it's necessary to go through this kind of mental anguish to reach the level of insight that Tayseer did, that is maybe beyond most other people.

NA: I think you have to be intense, I don't know if you have to be in *that much* pain, but I know when I write I have to be inspired, I have to be in a place where I'm very intense. I think writing

is a skill, but writing is a creation—you are creating something, you are reimagining life, you are creating an abstract form, not physically, but you are creating life, a whole situation, and you have to be intense to do that.

Tayseer was aware of other writers who committed suicide, some were his favorites, in particular he was impacted and felt very closely connected to Ernest Hemingway and Vladimir Mayakvovski, and both of them committed suicide in a way similar to how he chose to end his life. He had apparently alluded to this in conversations with his friends, he said ‘I know those people, those are my soulmates.’ He was able to sense their presence, sympathize with their agonies, and see the way they chose to leave as a viable solution. Tayseer’s son and wife shared with me how closely he felt connected with these writers. Like Hemingway and Mayakvovski, Tayseer was intense. Pain inspired him and made writing urgent for him, he had to say what bothered him, and he said it brilliantly in his writings. By translating him, I’m hoping that we will put him where he belongs. Because this is another human tragedy that is the culmination of circumstances, somebody who is extremely conscious and sensitive, took it all in and put it out for us in the form of poetry and writing, and couldn’t take it anymore and left, and now we have to deal with it. How to negotiate what he leaves us becomes our job as readers, or critics, or students of literature.

DESERT SORROWS. Poems by Tayseer al-Sboul. Translated by Nesreen Akhtarkhavari and Anthony A. Lee. Michigan State University Press, 2015. 139 pp.

Traduttori/traduttrici:

Ted Witham	Apollinaire	Patrick Thomas Ridge	Sandra Lorenzano
Jill Levine	Sacerio Gari	Emily McBride	Jordi Virallonga
Rebekah Curry	Baudelaire, Theognis	William Braun	“Tabarin”
Kate Gladsky	Homero Aridjis	Debadrita Bose	Indranil Ghosh
Philip White	Du Fu		

Christ

~~translated by Ted Witham

Christ (not the Wright Brothers) was “First in Flight”,

Ascended like a rocket to a record height.

Apple Christ of the eye

Twentieth favourite of the centuries he flies comprehending,

This century like Jesus has changed into a bird ascending.

The devils in the abyss lift their heads to see him dash.

They said he was imitating Simon Magus wanting cash

They shout that if he is so light he can steal into the sky, they must have caught him stealing.

The angels dance around the dancer’s dizzy wheeling

Icarus, Enoch, Elijah, Apollonius from Thyana’s philosophy scene

Float weightless around this first flying machine

They spread out from time to time to let those go past

Who get carried away by the Holy Eucharist

These priests who go up eternally elevating the bread

The plane alights at last its wings wide spread

Then the sky is full of millions of swallows

Swiftly the crows the falcons the owls all follow

From Africa arrive the ibis the flamingos the marabou storks, all sky-dwellers,

The Roc bird celebrated in talks by poets and story-tellers

Held flat in the greenhouses Adam’s skull the first head

The eagle from far-flung horizon shrieks to wake the dead

And from America are with wings blurred
macaws roadrunners little hummingbirds
From China the Pihai birds long and supple
Who have only one wing each and fly as a couple
Now watch the immaculate spirit-dove advise
As it is escorted by the lyre-bird and the peacock full of eyes,
The phoenix this flaming pyre which is of itself begotten
In an instant all his burning cinders fall forgotten
Sirens leaving the dangerous straits and dire
All three arriving singing beautifully in choir
And eagle phoenix Chinese Pihai all remain
To fraternise with this fascinating aeroplane.

GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE

Wing Rush

~~translated by Jill Levine

Wing Rush

Texting as I walked
along the streets
of Philadelphia
I felt her leaving:
I lost the call.

Connected
without any feeling
her code
had reached me
as a form
of cellular uncertainty.

Motionless in front
of the museum
thinking
about a man drowning
in a sea or landscape
by Bruegel
everything crashing
down, a silence
like fragments
of technology
by Icarus

ENRIQUE SACERIO GARI

JEU DE COURSE

~~translated by Kate Gladsky

I don't see the pewter horses running in circles over the turntable without seeing their shadows running on the wall too, in a fantastic competition where there is neither winner nor loser starting gate nor goal but with the same unsurpassable distance between the horses in the negative space following each other in this race of speedy undivided shadows of riders and mounts until the sun has set and the shadows one by one hurl themselves into nothingness

HOMERO ARIDJIS

Spleen ("I am like the king . . .")

~~translated by Rebekah Curry

I am like the king of a rainy country,

rich, but powerless, young and yet very old,
who, despising the obeisance of his tutors,
is bored with his dogs, as with other creatures.
Nothing can amuse him, not game, nor falconry,
nor his people dying before his balcony.
His favorite fool's ridiculous ballad
no longer distracts this cruel invalid;
his fleur-de-lis bed becomes a tombstone,
and the ladies who think every prince is handsome
can no longer find an outfit shameless enough
to coax a smile from this young skeleton.
The alchemist who makes his gold never was able
to rid him of the corrupted element,
and in these baths of blood descended from the Romans,
which, in their old age, the powerful remember,
he did not liven this dazed cadaver
where Lethe's green water flows instead of blood.

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

“Kyrnos, while I practice my art”

~~translated by Rebekah Curry

Kyrnos, while I practice my art, let there be a seal
on my verses. That way, they'll never be stolen

without it being noticed, and no one will replace
a good line here with a worse, but each will say,
“These words belong to Theognis from Megara,
who is famous far and wide.” Still, I can’t please
all the citizens. But that should come as no surprise,
Polypaides; for not even Zeus pleases everyone,
whether he makes it rain or clears the sky.

THEOGNIS

From “Cup and Country”

~~translated by Patrick Thomas Ridge

ONE

At fourteen, I already hated my parents.

Or maybe better without the adverb.

At fourteen, I *hated* my parents.

Although it had already been marred by a couple of disagreements when I was thirteen, my childish love, the love that made me think the world of my parents, had been poisoned by the deadly blend of my hormones and their intolerance (let’s be honest, there aren’t many parents that are tolerant throughout their child’s teenage years. Even the most liberal of parents, cool and easygoing, all of a sudden have their fifteen minutes, not of fame, but of authoritarianism. Sorry: no one’s safe). It could’ve been that; it wouldn’t have been unusual. But it wasn’t.

Ours, or rather: mine, my hate—has a specific date: July 9, 1977. Independence Day, for those who know a bit of Argentine history. It was Independence Day in that country, without a doubt; but not in the Madrid airport where my mother and I had just landed.

My father? We’d secretly said our goodbyes to him that morning at Grandma’s house. As he hugged me, he said:

“Take care of your mother. You’re going to be the man of the house.”

Faced with my expression of curiosity, anger, stress, all together, he added:

“I’ll catch up with you soon, Shorty, don’t you worry.”

Since I was a kid, he’d called me “Shorty,” not Matty, nor Matt, nor Matthew, like everyone else. “Shorty.” In that moment, it was less funny than ever.

“How long is soon, dad?”

Mom and grandma were crying. I accepted his embrace saying:
“Don’t take too long”
We never saw him again. In 1977, “soon” meant an eternity.

TWO

“Argentina prepares for the World Cup,” stated the nightly-news anchor. You already know which one: the man with the squared spectacles and the old-fashioned mustache. We would turn the TV on at nine and watch it a bit during dinner. After, everyone would go to their separate rooms. Mom often cried. I usually read, or smoked while looking at the dark sky through my bedroom window. Sometimes, I’d strum the guitar for a bit, or turn the radio on low. I hated her.

“It’s the dictatorship’s World Cup, Matty. They’re scumbags.”

I’d accompany her to the protests, and meetings with friends. For me, it was important to find out anything about dad. He’d said: “I’ll catch up with you soon, Shorty.” They still hadn’t found the body, and for that reason we thought it could appear at any moment. I hated him too.

The flyers we handed out said: “Play soccer in a concentration camp?” I still knew by heart all the player’s names: Fillol, Passarella, Tarantini, Ardiles, Bertoni, Houseman, Kempes. “It’s the dictatorship’s World Cup, Matty. They’re scumbags.” Despite that, I recited one name after another just like a church litany. “How long is soon, dad?” I am the man of the house.

Mom was resolute:

“In this house, we are not going to play the military’s game. No soccer, Matty.”

Watching a game meant betraying my father? But sending us alone to Spain, what was that?

“Besides that, surely all the games were fixed,” her friends said during the meetings.

“Hey, are we going to get a TV to watch the World Cup together?” asked the man from Santiago. Everyone’s hate-filled eyes fixed on him. I wanted to defend him, but when you’re fifteen, no one really cares what you think or say. Well, it was just a question.

I also hated them. And Argentina. Everyone. For about a year, I tried to forget my country. “A shitty country,” as my mom would say.

Almost a year in, and I still had trouble pronouncing the Spanish “C” and “Z”. They even made fun of my Argentine accent. What did I care? Pretty soon, no one would realize that I wasn’t from here. I even made up that I was from Madrid. Yes sir. “I’m from Madrid, man,” I’d respond to the idiots that would ask me where I was from.

I didn’t need that shitty country, soccer, or my old man.

THREE

I remember my routine for every single game. Well, it wasn’t that hard to remember: I’d get a joint and lock myself in my room. Me, a joint, and Pink Floyd. “For long you live and high you fly / but only if you ride the tide / and balanced on the biggest wave / you race towards an early grave.”

June 2nd: Argentina 2 – Hungary 1

June 6th: Argentina 2 – France 1

June 10th: Italy 1 – Argentina 0

June 14th: Argentina 2 – Poland 0

June 18th: Argentina 0 – Brazil 0

June 21st: Argentina 6 – Peru 0

Were they really fixed? But we even lost one! I couldn't make myself happy. I shouldn't have been happy. It was the dictatorship's World Cup. No matter what, I wanted to be there, embracing my classmates after each goal. "Come on, let's go, Argentina, let's win..." Probably best not to think about it. Not remember. "Breathe, breathe in the air," sings Roger Waters. Breathe deep.

I wish I could've been there.

There is no there.

FOUR

July 25th. The final: Argentina-Holland. El Monumental Stadium about to overflow. It's full to the brim. I'm in the café on the corner of the plaza. No, I don't enter. I feel like I'd betray my father if I sit down and watch the game. Will he be watching? I watch from the window. The confetti thrown from the stands. The flags. My body heat rises from emotion, but also pain. I'm far away and that country can no longer be my own. Can they all be accomplices? Better off forgetting about soccer, the dictatorship, everything. I walk. Where to? I go down San Bernardo towards Atocha Station. I don't think of boarding a train, but I like the atmosphere of big train stations. Maybe because they remind me of how I feel. Some uncertainty, helplessness, a desire to flee anywhere, a bit of anguish. Did I say I liked it? You all understand what I'm talking about, right? It's a little like sitting down to watch the ocean. I'm able to stop thinking and the waves of people and voices carry me far away.

How long was I like that? Would the first half have already finished? Shitty country. I hate it. It's finished. For me, it's finished.

"Hello," someone says.

Two shining black eyes smile in front of me. Her name ought to be Amina or Laila or Soraya. And you surely aren't more than thirteen or fourteen years old. She takes me by the hand and I follow her. I want to explain to her that I have no money, that there's a match, that my old man promised he'd arrive soon. And that I am fifteen years old and panicked that I am with a woman, even if she's only a girl, like her. Is it worth it to tell her everything?

She barely speaks Spanish.

"My name is Carmela," she says to me as I decide to believe her. "And you?"

"Javier," I lie using the roughest Spanish accent I can muster. She chooses to believe me.

We arrive to the small room that she shares with a group of other girls. Moroccans? Gypsies? There's not much light, a baby sleeps in one corner. Carmela closes the curtain that separates her bed from the rest. I let her caress me. I close my eyes. Kempes, and the confetti, and the flags, and the military, and El Monumental, and my parents. I hate them.

"Where you from, handsome?"

"From Madrid."

"Me too."

SANDRA LORENZANO

Death Is Not Death; It's Someone Who Dies

~~three translated by Emily McBride

Leaving home to find
a worn path is not in vain.

You're not troubled by the thought of passing,
or whether the water runs into the sea,
only that it's no longer fresh, or river.

If you thought of death like Rilke,
how strange it would be to die,

but death is not death, it's someone who dies,
and it inhabits the memory of something living,
like saltpeter, leaving the shape of an eye on the door.

Back To The Neighborhood

I was born in this neighborhood, I know

these streets that run into the sea
better than my heart, I know what they're like at every hour,
the bread is baked at five.

Each time I passed through these streets,
I saw how the windows changed,
from hardware stores to travel agencies,
a stifling space, not even poor,
endless poverty for sustaining lime,
parked cars
near the train tracks,
gangs of idle teenagers, patches of ground
with sheets of soiled newspaper,
beer bottles, tires, condoms,
and some syringes and scrap metal:
the sheer bad blood of a rusty life.

I dined here with men who have died,
I kissed women who I've never seen again,

But the memory, the passion, the wait,
they're no longer a place, a bed, a neighborhood bar,
here lies the future,

intimacy without any meaning,
that I know, and that these things weigh you down- fuck-
and frighten you,

like my mother's ashes
slowly plunging me
into a snowy river,
into an ocean that burns up your insides,
stretches towards you, and swallows up your childhood.

Requiem

Admit it, you're oblique,
you must say but you don't choose
exact distances,

Even if you're right you lose,
because the truth doesn't walk the line or even exist,
and you lose,
you're like a castle in ruins,

the sand of a war you've found yourself in
and somebody will think
that everyone at the party can keep their head
easily, all but you,
a Pyrrhic arrogance
a flank they've used to invade
what was already destroyed,
but you won't ask forgiveness or settle your debts
when they come to say goodbye to you one day.

You'll be laid out to face everyone,
they'll speak of you even if they don't want to
and you will live on even when your ashes are left for rotten,
because those of us who live with passion
already change the tide forever.

JORDI VIRALLONGA (Catalan, contemporary)

Two questions

~~translated by William Braun

Question XXIX

What nobility consists of.

TABARIN: When I think about where I was born and where my grandparents came from, I get an urge to know what makes someone noble.

MASTER: One may acquire nobility in three ways, Tabarin: through blood or birth, through letters, or through some admirable, magnanimous deed where one makes one's virtue known. Those who acquire nobility through blood enjoy the privileges nobles enjoy because they were born into a venerable house and possess a family of ancient stock, ennobled by former kings and princes. Others acquire nobility through magnificent deeds, as those who show themselves courageous in some engagement or siege where they demonstrate their quality and character by feat of arms, lavishly risking life, regardless of blows, to win glory and honor forever.

Nam genus et proavos et quae non fecimus ipsi

Vix ea nostra puto

Thirdly, one may acquire nobility through the production of letters and literary works that immortalize one's name and shield one's glory from the buffets of time and fortune. For example, Cicero, Virgil, Homer, and numerous others, serious authors whose reputation one reads engraved on the brow of immortality. Although of lowly rank and feeble seed, they were nevertheless ennobled by their studies.

TABARIN: If all that's true, I want a sword right now, because I'm nobility.

MASTER: Silence, you huge, half-witted peasant! You are not an elegant nobleman.

TABARIN: Yes, I think I am. First, I'm noble through blood and birth because my father was a butcher. Second, haven't you heard that my grandfather once defeated a company of crabs that were besieging his pants? He made such a mess of the soldiers roaming down under, pillaging everything in their path, that his fingernails were drenched in their blood.

As for the nobility that comes from letters, if you asked the opinion of everyone the world over, you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who wouldn't rule in my favor. The nobility I've gained from the other two doesn't hold a candle to the nobility I've gained from letters because I've always been a courier, ever since I was little, and I've delivered tons of them. Not even Mercury, Jupiter's courier, has delivered as many letters as I have. So there you have it, I'm a nobleman, through blood, deeds, and letters.

Question XLV

How to say three facts with one word.

TABARIN: Have you ever learned to say three facts with one word?

MASTER: No, Tabarin, we do not have the fortune to speak a language that contains words with so many meanings. As the earliest peoples to inhabit the earth, and the speakers of the world's oldest language, the Hebrews continue to enjoy an advantage here over every other nation in existence. They express several meanings with a single word. Conversely, we frequently employ many words and phrases to express one meaning alone.

TABARIN: You better talk to the maid. She taught me to the other day.

MASTER: How did she employ her expertise, Tabarin?

TABARIN: She was walking in the Rue Saint Denis with another maid, also from the neighborhood. It had rained a lot, and she was afraid of soiling her underskirts (a lost cause, poor girl, they're always like that). Anyway, she started hiking up her skirts around her butt, and did the same around her crotch. Then, she turned to her friend and said, "Good lord, it's nasty here." With only one word, she said three facts: first, that it was nasty in the street where she was walking; second, that it was nasty in her crotch, where she'd stuck one hand; and third, that it was nasty in her butt, where she'd stuck the other.

TABARIN (17th Century French mountebank)

Orlovsky, Peek a Boo

~~ translated by Debadrita Bose

'Oh 4-legged bed'

Bed is one four legged creature--

And people say Indranil does not move

Is he a stone

Under him a fire is set

And smoke coiled up

Both autumn and late autumn are over

Where window has become motionless

Just by the lighting of candles

December has its shorts

Knowing that, I wonder about the size

Size is now a great fan of the sky

Where cycle is the equal of the road

The song does not move

Not even Indranil does...

Original: sample

Orlovsky, টুর্কি ...

'Oh 4-legged bed'

বছানা এক চতুষ্পদী প্রাণী –

আর লোক বলে ইন্দ্রনীল নড়ে না

ব্যাটা কঁ পাথর নাকঁ

ওঁ নচি আগুন দয়ো হলো cont.

INDRANIL GHOSH (Bengali, contemporary)

Song of the Young Man

~~Five translations by Philip White

Who is this young blade on horseback bowing to no one,
dismounting at the steps, sitting down at a man's table

without trading names, rough, blustering, rude in the extreme,
waving at the silver jug, ordering me to pour him a taste?

Old Country Fellow

An old country fellow looking out from his fence at a bend in the river.

His rough-cut gate's set "all wrong" but opens true to the river's flow.

Fishermen gather nets, drop them deep in the clear backwater pool.

Peddler boats come out at the time of reflected sun...

A long road. My heart's still at the passes, suffering Swordgate.

And what could it signify, that cloudtuft over the zither master's steps?
Still no report of the king's men retaking the east.
Only autumn's births, and from the city gates, the sadness of painted horns.

Ninth Day: Climbing the Wall at Zizhou

In other years wine of the yellow flower.
Today: an old man gone white at the temples.

Straining for pleasure, I find my muscles changed.
The yearly staring into distance remains.

Brothers and sisters in sad songs,
the court in my drunken eye,

armed soldiers peopling the border passes...
This ninth day, here, thoughts go on and on.

Wayhouse

Dawn steadily colors the fall window.
The trees empty, yet more wind in the sky.

Then the sun breaks over the cold mountains
and the river gleams through last night's mists...

The wise rule never rejects the world of things...

With age and ailment I've achieved codgerhood.

Not much left of life's happenings for me,
cast-off, adrift, tumbling like a weed.

Crossing Guanglu Pass

Crossing the mountains in falling sun, I come down a sheer cliff
and look west: a thousand more mountains, ten thousand, all reddening.

On the tree limbs birds in confusion sing the time.

In the face of the dark no human. I'm one traveler making his way.

My horse starts, but tumbling down the deep canyon doesn't scare me,
it's when the grass moves that I'm terrified, imagining longbows.

We won't find it again, the way it was in the Kaiyuan years,
the roads these days so broken, charged with hazard.

DU FU

* * * * *