

VOLUME 13 *number 3*

Ezra hopes that, before you are consigned to an inner circle of Dantesque Hell (not the circle of his twenty-plus translators—just a very unpleasant region), you will join ALTA. Our convention is next week (November 7), Rochester, NY. You'd then receive *Translation Review*, whose recent issues feature, within a vast tiara, these gems:

~~George Steiner's remark that "[I]n short, the existence of art and literature, the reality of felt history in a community, depend on a never-ending, though very often unconscious, act of translation." (from his *After Babel*, cited in *Issue 101*). He helps us remember that everyone is a translator. Everyone translates recent work differently, in his or her mind and experience—just as every age translates the older works that still speak in a vital way.

~~Mark Polizzotti's assertion that "The bottom line is, I believe we should maintain respect for the source text, but not fetishize it, not be so awestruck that we get paralyzed.[...] The fact is, writing—like the gods, for that matter—is a human invention, which means it is inherently imperfect and can be improved." (*Issue 100*) See Borges's quip, on our Submissions Page. *Ezra* and its staffers often make the point that any authentic artist makes: that his or her "work" was never finished in the sense of *perfected* in any case. The translation, like the original work, approximates the ineffable.

~~and a survey of translators (by the Translation Committee of the Authors Guild) is full of data about your peers (*Issue 103*). Among the data are the fact that some conditions of our work have improved, and also the helpful note on pay (for about half of respondents, in prose translation): 12-13 cents a word. This is sometimes cited as \$125 for 1000 words.

We're happy to note that this issue contains more prose than usual. Always welcome are works or excerpts of about 1000 words, or scenes from plays, or prose poems.

In an exception to house style, we include Xe M. Sánchez's original language—Asturian! Our shameless partisanship with a language Gral. Franco suppressed. And this is a self-translation.

There is a review and a publication notice in this issue.

FEATURED WRITER:

Calvin Olsen holds an M.A. in English and Comparative Literature from UNC-Chapel Hill and an M.F.A. from Boston University, where he received a Robert Pinsky Global Fellowship to locate and translate the work of the late Mozambican-born poet Alberto de Lacerda. His poetry and translations have appeared in *AGNI*, *Asymptote*, *Tampa Review*, *The London Magazine*,

The Missouri Review, and many others. Calvin now lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and serves as poetry editor for The Carolina Quarterly.

The following are translations of contemporary Portuguese poet Guimarães.

Contribution to an A.M. Pires Cabral Bestiary

In what language does a river run
when it crosses a border? A
lamprey hesitates between the banks of the Minho
(indecisive
insidious) what name should I give it? On
the right bank in A Garda
it answers by the Galician name (on
the left side in Caminha it takes
the Portuguese one)
the bilingual *lamprea* is like certain politicians
(vascillating left or right depending
on the current). The politic lamprey always
does it on the down low—
it flees as far as it can looking for its cunning name
in the spotlight
of a menu.

Antico Caffè Greco

- *We saw much, we learned much*

CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ

This is
the eleventh coffee this teacup has
had today
(way too much caffeine to drink
in a single day). Among
the teacups in the room this is
the one that's conversed longest (the one
that best understands these days
that would teach me the most).
I hope it gets a turn with a sapid
lemon tea—
soon enough (I am certain) it won't
manage to sleep a wink.

“OK If it's Pepsi?”

to Bernardo Pinto de Almeida

I like to see
hieroglyphs in the footprints of seagulls.
I don't like it when holidays land on
a weekend. I like the frescoes of Pompei
on really hot days. I don't like it
in the least that Greeks add water to wine.
I prefer nameless heroes to

the names of great heroes. I distinguish the pain
of losers from the total loss of pain. I like
to feel the music returning to my life.
I don't like the Mediterranean
transformed into a cemetery.
I prefer a return to the soul to a return
on investment. I distinguish the liquidity of banks
from the liquidity of your eyes. I like
a Caesar salad in a *piazza* in Rome.
I don't like ordering a Coke and hearing:
"OK if it's Pepsi?"

Minor Gods

The
morning is still asleep when I go
in my shoes about the streets of Provence where
everything seems
foreign to me. I go and look for the poem:
the market is full of flowers (there is no
greater sin than choosing beauty
the pleasure in possessing it is the reason
for my pain). The truth
(it is known) has
always been subjective and I wanted more from life

(more than this thick nothing)
exactly what I can't explain
I don't know. You must refuse bitterness
at the end of innocence—
and I have nothing more to say:
history
(as it is known) is written
by the victors.

Mr. Lopes and the Power

For
Lopes the rise to power was not hard
(because Lopes is small and
to really reach the top one needs only
to be diminutive). He who
by nature is too large will never
come in first place (already Lopes:
always overcoming
even when he comes up short). If
today Lopes is at the top it's
because that's all he's good for—
one ascends to power by being incompetent
(except those who manage a leg-up
over those who rise on their backs).

JOÃO LUIS BARRETO GUIMARÃES (Portugal, contemporary)

Traduttori/traduttrici:

Timothy Provost (Clemente)

Donald Mace Williams (Beowulf)

Maria Bartlett, Ronald Friis (Blanco)

Adam Sorkin, Diana Manole (Iuga)

Susan Thorne (Mayer)

Eftychia Mikelli (Mainas)

Xe M. Sánchez (Sánchez)

Excerpt of novel *Fast*

~~translated by Timothy Provost

10.

You talk about the plan; the eyebrows arc.

Pursed lips, heads telling you no, asking you for what.

You smoke your last cigarettes on the terrace of the apartment.

Each trip is capable—whether you know it or not—of changing it all. This one isn't leisure—it's not vacation, not a visit.

The terrace isn't yours either.

You lean on the railing as the seagulls sail over your forehead. They see you; they know that

you're there but they don't care about you. They carry on with their journey as you light a cigarette to go with your coffee. Your only land is the tiny grey mountain that covers the ashtray.

For those seagulls, you're just another crab on the wharf, but to lose that status is going to be a tough loss for you.

A journey starts with the thudding of the pulsations in your chest. Any change is susceptible, lightness a hazardous mechanism controlled by indolent operators. Sometimes a journey starts once you buy a ticket, once you get the visa or once you pass through the checkpoint of some particular place. Sometimes it starts with a taste, or a skin, or a coast. Sometimes, you have to return before you can feel the journey's impact. You feel a dizziness from getting up too quickly, from cigarettes on an empty stomach. These feelings start today, which marks two months to the big day. You don't have a ticket. You don't have much of a plan for anything, except for the fact that you'll quit smoking just to show how serious you are about it all.

9.

Two forces pull the same chord inside you. One consecrates each moment, each encounter, each smell or corner that keeps you here. *Enjoy*, screams the team that violently pulls the chord from extreme A. *Savor it, keep that sunset for yourself*. You pull hard from that side of the chord. From the other side, from extreme B, you can hear the crowds screaming their *LO lololo lo LO LO* from the stadiums.

You run into the president of your apartment complex in the elevator. He's wearing a yacht club polo and competition swimsuit. His wife is with him, not that she gives a damn. She doesn't give a damn about being with him, doesn't give a damn about the presidency, or the yacht club, or the complexes that he manages.

He's wearing polarized swimming goggles over his head; they're pulling each of his hairs back painfully, and he keeps adjusting them as he notices how his toes stick out from his flip-flops. She smells of your land—of an ashtray—of a sweat that isn't from exercise or sport, of an endocrine system, of the antidepressants that she keeps in her coin purse. With a dry, hoarse voice, after the doors slide shut, after asking you what floor, you hear, for the first time in the two years that you've been living there, her say something other than just an everyday greeting.

"Well," she says. "Let's see if we get trapped in here."

You talk about that. That's all she says.

About that ugly habit of fear.

About that bondage to fear, like an ankle chained to a steel ball. You can't take it anymore. You stop the elevator by pressing the emergency button so that you can go down the stairs. They stay in the elevator (which has the capacity to hold six people, or over 1,000 pounds) until they get to the first floor, where they finally get out and make their way to the beach.

*

This afternoon they've thrown out your sister. Once she got back from lunch they gave her the notice and a few hours to gather up her things. She feels guilty for having done her job well for six years, without making a single complaint. You envy the consistency of her career. She's always held the same job, never once collected unemployment. She's afraid and she has two kids. Her husband also has money problems. Their house seems more burdensome now that it has two cars and two tiny mouths that ask for answers and for food. You know that she'll find a new job soon because you know that she's the type who doesn't know how to be without work. You know that, in a few months, she'll somehow come to realize that it'll be the best thing that's ever happened to her. By then you'll be on the other side of the Atlantic.

*

You've put your van up for sale. You already have someone set up to stay at your apartment during the next three months. The landlady, obviously, doesn't have to know a thing about it. You wrap up at your job and you leave. Maybe you can earn a few more bucks. Nine weeks, a little more than two months and you'll be gone. Only then will you know what book, what clothes, or what valuable junk you'll have lost in the move.

*

Mar sends you the location of the house on Google Earth. The hallway, the street, the red bricks of a Bostonian neighborhood—even a neighbor sitting on the stairs. Up-to-date details of the front of the house. She doesn't want to show you the inside of the house, though. She wants you to see that in the flesh.

You love her.

You're also going for that.

You picking up the belongings in your room like a shoe picks up a piece of strawberry gum from the floor.

“You're going? Too bad.”

People that look familiar mourn their future loss of you and it makes you feel weird. People with whom you've never held a serious conversation, people with whom you've never even shared a meal. They mourn a loss, their loss, and they appropriate your future departure. All their comments upon hearing the news are more or less the same.

“You can always come back.”

Their commentary also reveals a resentment.

“This place won't change.”

8.

Your journey starts to become rectangular and maroon.

At the police station, they send you home because the system has fallen apart. The policeman at the counter, who, if he were black would undoubtedly be played by Morgan Freeman, is exhausted. Just a few weeks away from his retirement, he suggests that you come back tomorrow at 8:30. The next morning at 8:10 there is already a frenzied line in front of the station, but the doors don't even open until 8:55. Morgan Freeman has the type of dark circles around his eyes that you'd expect to see on a parent, like he's assisting someone with some type of chronic disease, someone who's bedridden. He gets frustrated when he finds out that only two of the twenty-five people in the room (which is cramped with school desks) have come with a prescheduled appointment. You tried booking your appointment in advance, but they scheduled your date for forty days away. Not soon enough. You need to make sure that you have your passport as soon possible so that you can have it in your back pocket—absolutely no exceptions; you need it. Some of the people around you leave and so you decide to crouch down next to Officer Freeman's desk and remind him that just yesterday he sent you home, that you need your passport now. He asks if you have the exact amount of cash.

It's 25.76 euros.

If the state wants an exact amount then why don't they round the price? \$25, \$26, even

\$70...anything but 25.76.

You have the correct change.

Morgan tells you to meet with him at the door in five minutes.

Once you're inside, something prohibits you from scanning your picture. The other officer grows impatient and he huffs, apparently wanting to make sure that you catch a whiff of his breath. Imperturbably, he tries to enter into a state of hypnosis—or at the very least, tries to just keep waiting a few more years until the moment when he can finally go home and put on his pajamas and stay away from the burdens of the real, outside world.

You ask for the American consulate on the island. He checks a list and asks you if the Brazilian one will do. He continues explaining that it's tough, that there aren't a lot of jobs over there, that he hopes that you can get lucky with your visa.

Then the phrase comes out.

“My girl is there.”

Your mouth fills up the way it does when you watch her sleep with her lips pursed.

“Ah, of course,” he says. “Well, if the missus is there...”

“No, no, Morgan, she's not my missus. She isn't my wife. You don't get it. She's my girl.”

HUGO CLEMENTE

“Eternity and a Day”

~~translated by Maria Bartlett and Ronald Friis

Theo Angelopoulos

A string of stars threaded together
by the same sky that divides them

A galaxy of constellations
united by hollow space

And space finally unified
by the power of words

“Illumination”

Krzysztof Zanussi

If looking at the night sky
instead of seeing stars
or the resplendent glow
of the celestial bodies
we could see instead
the wells of darkness
that dive like arrows
between the constellations
until striking their target
in the immense starry dome
- Olbers Paradox! -
we would then begin
to see that the night sky
is neither dark blue nor black
as we've been told
and led to believe
for so very long

The night sky instead
is the absolute absence
of illumination

"Cybernaut"

Stanley Kubrick

Why do we have so many letters?
Just one or two are enough
to answer:

Do the Creator and all of creation
truly exist?

Yes / No

Or do only creation
and its mysteries exist

The incessant transformation
of beings into other beings

The beautiful
terrible flow of life

The constant passages
from the real to the virtual?

Yes / No

If it's all so basic
why do you feel lost, cybernaut?

In the expanse of the cosmos
the shadow of paradox
is our only north star.

ALBERTO BLANCO (Mexico, contemporary)

A Summer Full of Flies

~~translated by Susan Thorne

Aunt parked the car right in front of our house. We got out; it started snowing again. We stood at the closed doors in front of our house. Like last time, we wanted to climb over the fence, but we had to ring the bell. While we were waiting, we noticed that the broken window had been repaired. We heard a hum: the garden door sprang open. A strange woman was standing in the doorway of our house and a strange man said: Welcome! Two children were pushed to the

front: Look, they lived in our house before! the woman whispered to them. We stared at the two children's heads. Now shake hands! Aunt urged us. I've already put on the coffee, the woman said, finally letting us into our house. Unfamiliar children's coats were hanging on our coat rack. We went past the kitchen into the living room. It'll be ready right away, the woman said, and smiled. We could bring up the desk in the meantime, the man suggested, and Uncle nodded. The basement is on the right, the man explained – but we already knew that! You could see the outlines of our kites on the inside of the basement door. We went down to the basement. When our tortoise was alive, she hibernated there. Now: our furniture. Our furniture in the basement of our house, under plastic sheets. We'll take the rest of the things away soon, Uncle promised. No problem, the man said, waving away the suggestion. The two of them carried up the bunk bed in pieces. The woman and our aunt were drinking coffee. The children are having their first swim lessons in the spring, Aunt announced. We've been able to swim for a long time! said the strange children in our house. You'll learn it very fast, too, the strange woman said to us, and to her own children: Don't you want to play together? We went up the stairs to our room. This is our nursery, the children said. In the corner where our bunk bed had stood: a dollhouse. The girl pulled the red-white checked curtains open and shut. The boy switched on a lamp. A doll in blue trousers was standing in front of a bed next to another doll wearing a flowered dress; two small dolls' heads looked out from under the blanket. That's when my brother knocked down the dollhouse. The furniture, the children, the parents – they all flew out of the house. And the light.

The girl burst into tears and the boy went running downstairs. You apologize right now! our aunt demanded. They're just children, really, the woman said consolingly. Right this minute, I said! Aunt hissed. My brother didn't say a thing. Our coats were brought from our coat rack. The door opened – our wind chimes rang. Just then the man said: There's still a bicycle in the garage. The first ride with the new bicycle in summer: our parents' laughter, their clapping, in a summer full of flies. Looking straight ahead! Looking back: mouths wide open, eyes wide open. A knee covered with flies. A bandage on my summertime wound. It will be all better now! A kiss on the wound, a kiss on my forehead the next morning: the sun just has to set eight times, then you'll be back home – in the summer, a summer full of flies. I don't want it to end! Looking ahead looking back. Mouths wide open, eyes wide open. Full of flies. Where's your

apology? My brother silently plucked at the snow, I didn't touch the bicycle. The sun set. A snowball hit our house.

ANNA-ELISABETH MAYER (Austria, contemporary)

EL PADRÍN

(Regalu pa E.S.G.)

Ero'l padrín.
Nun ero Vito Corleone,
ero'l padrín
d'una prima mía.
Ero'l peor padrín
del mundiu.
Enxamás m'aluerdo
del so cumpleaños.
Enxamás-y fici un regalu.
Poro nagüo
por dedica-y estos versos,
que son un mensaxe
de ciñu
nuna botiella aventada
a esi océanu

que ye la eternidá,
a esi océanu rebalbu
nomada poesía.

The Godfather

(Gift for E.S.G.)

I am the godfather.
I am not Vito Corleone.
I am the godfather
of a cousin of mine.
I am the worst godfather
in the world.
I never remember
her birthday.
I never gave her a gift.
That's why I want
to dedicate to her
these verses,
which are a message
of affection
in a bottle
thrown at that ocean
called eternity,
at that rebel ocean

called poetry.

It Is Not Your Poem

If you are looking for
an epic poem,

this is not your poem.

If you want to find
the truths of the world,
this is not your poem.

If you want a verse
to steal a forbidden kiss
this is not your poem.

This is a poem written
for me,

written for the mirror
which reminds me
each morning

--before I put on
my hero disguise--
who I am.

The Best Tool

I emerged from a humble clan,

people from the mountains
of Ponga, of Asturias.
I remembered them
in Times Square,
in Shanghai, in Beijing,
in Havana, in Paris,
in the Lorient's Festival
in Budapest, in Dublin...
They gave me
my mother tongue,
the best tool to court
that unattainable
and slippery girl
desired by all
called Poetry,
which is hidden everywhere,
in the places
where my memory
was born,
and in the places
that I am stacking
in my traveler's backpack.

XE M. SANCHEZ

Beowulf, ll. 1-52

~~translated by Donald Mace Williams

Ho! We know the tales from days of yore
Of the Speardane people's kings' renown,
And how those lords wrought deeds of valor.
Often did Scyld Scefing wrest
From many foes their mead-hall seats
And frighten warriors since he with nothing
Was first found. He knew solace for that,
Beneath the clouds in honor he throve
Until his neighbors every one
Along the whale paths had to heed
And pay him tribute. A good king, that!
Later a son was born to him,
Young in the house, whom the Lord had sent
As the people's help, for He had seen
The ills they bore when they were kingless
So long a time. The Lord of life,
All heaven's king, gave him world fame.
Renowned afar this Beow was,
This son of Scyld—across all Daneland.
Thus should, while still his father's ward,
A young man with great works and gifts
See that in age his dear companions
Will stand by him when war breaks out
And save his people. By praiseworthy deeds
A man of any tribe may thrive.
At the fated time, strong to the last,

Scyld gave himself to God's safekeeping.
They bore him down to the ocean's stream,
His own comrades, as by him bidden
When the Shieldings' lord still wielded words—
The land's dear prince had a lengthy reign.
In the harbor lay the ring-prowed craft,
Icy, sea-eager, a vessel for lords.
They laid their beloved ruler then,
Ring-giver, famed one, by the mast,
In the ship's bosom. Treasure there
Was brought from far, much ornament;
I never heard of a fairer ship
Made ready with heroes' armor and arms,
Helmets and corslets. There lay on his breast
Many a treasure to be borne with him
Far away by the force of the tides.
Hardly less did they heap his dower
With the people's gifts than had those others
Who in the first place sent him forth
On the waves alone when he was a child!
They raised him now a banner of gold,
Lofty, and let the ocean bear him,
The waver of spears. Their spirits mourned;
Their hearts grieved. None can say for certain,
Hero nor wise man under the sky,
By whom that cargo was received.

Poems from Dangerous Caprices

~~translated by Adam Sorkin and Diana Manole

when I awaken in the morning

before the light
slices my eye in two
your image appears
on the small dark negative
like a watchdog of sleep
like a moon that sets
in a ring of water

do you remember vienna

a city where you can fall in love
a city with a thousand churches
and a thousand brothels
where among pieces of the host
scattered on the cobblestones
the hooves of horses from the spanish school
are women's high heels

I watch those boys

how they cavort like puppies
in front of the apartment building
and I think of their seed
which secretly ripens and gushes
on solitary nights
without any woman

what wouldn't I give for mister erwin

to return and reopen his *pension*
so I might awaken in the bed with painted angels
the tomcat moccin purring at my feet
as on a dutch postcard

what wouldn't I give to see the bear
emerging from hibernation
and my red finger
pressing the doorbell button in Rotterdam
when mother and father were young
and no one had yet died

do you remember the night

when we made love in dutch
and machine guns rattled in our ears
so romantically that it wasn't really us
under the same roof
the cry of the wild goose
almost white

you were so much a part of me

I put my hand on your books
and the words would germinate in my belly
I see myself as so guilty
that even the thought
is like a forbidden act

a salesman showed up last night

to ask
how much I'd pay for you
it was a difficult, dangerous question
when I wanted to answer him
I turned my head
and my mouth filled with blood

this commerce with god

is as if you'd make love for money

he always pays me for suffering

I always pay him for joy

I can see him

at daybreak

getting ready to haggle with me

there's silence twice a day

between one train and another

the time when I wander

to the toy store

it's so good to be

first a mother then a lover

near these rubber sailors

you squeeze their tummies

and they sing

NORA IUGA (Romania, contemporary)

The Grand Ineffable

~~translated by Eftychia Mikelli

*You sure know how to talk,
said the clay doll to the lathe.*

The sage asserts:

The hands that create at night
in front of the muttering fireplace logs
will move tonight towards the leather-bound volume
like shadows of tireless partisans
and the smell of wine and wooden awe
will fill love with images,
lines with innuendo.

And when crepuscular crevices arch
while I will still be writing
outside the day will rise,
possibilities of finitude will propagate,
the eternity of succession,
and the horizon will frame this with incessant light
like a bow of justice,
like a coat of arms.

Yet, it is the end of the day that I pronounce:

It's dark outside behind my curtain.

Another day gone. Its mistakes big.
Distraught at the helplessness,
devastation albeit futile repentance,
weigh heavy on my desk.
Outside streets construction sites twists and turns and their people
and coherence and laws
seem operative as the wind blows.
So big the dark windows of this world.
I will draw the curtain for a while,
I will see the vague reflection
of the loquacious lamp, I'll pretend that I am gazing at labyrinths,
abysms, that I am observing,
and then I'll go to bed naked.
But even this won't help
neither intimations of my palimpsest soul
nor the fact that I was loved
nor the decay, the stained decomposing staircase
the generations
the dogs
the wells.

Material Memory

Another kind of testaments and coffins.

Living in a chaste, unrelenting world
materials embrace the drama
of existence.

I remember Elke who used to point at
the hollowed cushions on the sofa
every time we had a fight,
but now I no longer care
that they don't belong to either of us.
The cushions desiccated in the attic.
The sun came in through the window
and shuttered the rose petals on the covers.
The plastic glass on the chairs in the parlour
fights back sometimes
as seasons go.
If someone sits there they'll break.
Time does enough.
It bends them
like toast
dipped
in one's milk.

The Train To Leningrad

Forty degrees of something.

A woman at the central bus station
rose from the iron chairs arrangement
and paced briefly on the snowy southbound platform
before halting erect at the edge
above the half-buried rails.
The reflection of her green scarf shone in her eyes
and she was wearing a capped graywet air

that somehow made her legs look taller.
She paused her stroll,
her attention far removed from the trajectory of her gaze.
Then the train arrived, the bell rang,
the conductor got off, the drunks came out,
the wound bled, the season ended
and thus began that which I now am when I persist.

The elegy of certainties

Repetition for the deaf.

I keep reading our conversations
like a little boy playing with marbles

I read the words that you swore upon life
passing through the gigantic chestnut trees
as if they were bathroom curtains

the pebbled dragon alley
the silence between two illusions
the fire amidst the silence

you often said "it's fine"
and you were two hours late

you thought that the domes soar
to protect your hair from the rain

you briefly joined me for coffee
then came shopping, your future, work
and you left at dusk betraying
your words

like all cowards do
if need crosses their path.

ALEXIOS MAINAS (Greece, contemporary)

REVIEW:

COMEMADRE, Larraquy, Roque. Translated by Cleary, Heather. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2018. Print.

Round and Round Larraquy's Literary Eddy

The cover of Roque Larraquy's novel *Comemadre* stares back at you—a lidless eye set on a pink background of magnified muscle tissue. It is the first of many circular, vortical metaphors found in this longlist nominee for the 2018 National Book Award for Translated Literature. Larraquy's spiraling prose and frequent use of body horror can read as farcical, and yet while an Argentine doctor debates the ethics of lying to his patients so he may cleave their noggins at a later date, and an artist cuts off his own finger as a peripheral addition to an installation, there is a quality entirely formal about the novel's occurrences. Underpinned by Cartesian philosophy, history, and the natural world, *Comemadre* is a neat and compelling package masquerading as disarray.

Split in two, the novel reuses-recycles plots 102 years apart. The first: a group of doctors working outside of Buenos Aires in 1907 bend to the will of their boss who endeavors to sever

the heads of still-alive patients in a bid to gain some insight into death and the great beyond. The second: a nameless artist is reading a PhD dissertation on his career—mainly his gallery installations which involved everything from a two-headed child to dozens of disembodied hands quaking on wires to elective facial reconstructive surgery. And while these two narrative halves may seem disparate, they are in fact made of the same literary symbols and stuffs and serve to highlight the cyclical nature of not just history, but of man's rapacious search for ultimate truth.

The themes and symbols throughout the novel repeat on a scale both grand and miniscule. For instance, the *comemadre* plant for which the book is named, a cactus-like plant that expels organisms that in turn consume its body, plays a crucial role in the separate accounts. It first is used to discard of the cadavers that amount during the doctors' macabre experiment. And years later it metastasizes to the artist's totemic installation, where it eats through the leg of his bygone lover while he mimics his screams of pain. At the expense of unpacking the references within these anecdotes, they will serve to illustrate the large-scale sybolic continuity present in the novel.

The minute details that repeat imbue the prose with a playful aura, as it feels like pieces of a puzzle are shifting into place. On page 73, while the doctors record the final moments of the severed heads, one patient resolves to say only, "Denmark." The only other reference to Denmark is when a century later a Norwegian friend of the artist is wearing it as a slogan on a t-shirt. With some research I was satisfied to learn that Denmark has a history in Buenos Aires—Larraquy's home—with Dutch immigrants arriving to the province of Tandil as early as 1860 (Bjerg). These cascading networks of association are fun and feel as if they could slide infinitely into the historical abyss.

That which most closely unites the protagonists is their desire to aid in the discovery of certain self-evident truths, be they scientific or artistic. It then comes as no surprise to find references to Descartes and his work throughout. On page 11 the aforementioned boss is describing the experiment to his physician staff by slicing the head from a duck using a prototype mechanism that reads *cogito ergo sum*. At page 127 the artist references his carnivorous installation *Cartesian Doc: Pathos and Method*, directly alluding to the sanatorium experiment after a chance encounter with the compound. Though, it's Descartes' theory of moving bodies (celestial or otherwise) that appears most frequently.

Descartes' theory concerns physics and postulates that if empty space doesn't exist, elementary particles must move in a ceaseless vortex—A replacing B, B replacing C, and C returning again to replace A, in a loop that allows for the conservation of energy in a given space (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Applied in a literary framework, in the space of the novel, we might consider Larraquy's frequent references to circles, whether drawn of marching ants, ice skaters, or the death machine's final manifestation that slices the heads of nine patients concurrently in a ring, as such vortices hinting at the novel's upholding schema. *Comemadre* is a matrix of macro and micro detail that circulates so as to create new configurations while retaining the same matter of which it is composed. Recurring events, recurring objects, recurring figures of speech even all suggest narrative roots in this theory.

And if the plot points outlined above still read as unbelievable, one need only see the historical and natural precedent from which they are derived. Considering the comemadre plant: it gives birth to the agent of its own demise, not unlike the crab spider—*Diaea ergandros*. When the spiders' eggs hatch, the crab spider mother offers her own body as an inaugural meal (Engelhaupt). Or if it's the gruesome installations that give you pause, I take you to Chris

Burden's 1974 performance *Trans-fixed* in which he had himself nailed like Christ to the hood of a VW Beetle (Jaworowski). Maybe it's the lying to cancer patients at the expense of scientific advancement that really nauseates you. I bring your attention to the 1946 Syphilis experiments in Guatemala, in which American doctors in a clandestine effort to understand the abilities of penicillin infected "prison inmates, mental patients and soldiers" with the disease (McNeil Jr.). These, and a litany of other real-world examples, show the happenings in *Comemadre* to be recognizable in so much that truth is stranger than fiction.

This Cartesian reading, along with the novel's historical and natural precedents, shed new light on the book's first epigraph from Ferdinand de Saussure: "What predominates in any change is the survival of earlier material. Infidelity to the past is only relative." Methods may change, but that which will never falters is mankind's desire to push farther, know more, and be part of something so much greater than it. Roque Larraquy is no exception.

~~Will Carter

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Borbély is one of the most noted Hungarian poets from the post-Communist era. Mulzet is a previous winner of the Best Translated Book award (2014).

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