

VOLUME 16 number 3

*Ezra* closes out the year with a dazzling featured poet and hopes that our group, ALTA, can meet in person for next year's convention. If you have any pull, urge the ALTA officers to get us all together.

As the great poet says, "The text is not an independently existing object but the heuristic aggregate of all possible interpretations which can be imposed upon it" (Nietzsche). Perhaps writers do not dwell on this, but readers should—and translators. Perhaps even more: readers of translations.

If you've taught a writing workshop have you asked students "Why do you write?" We have, and we've never heard a response that seems to engage with Nietzsche's remark. Let's make that front and center in any translation workshop.

This preface to the issue addresses translation workshops. In most cases, the student has linguistic ability but has not reflected deeply on the practice or theory of translation. One goal might be to suggest how much of our cognitive life is in fact translation. One of our mentors, Rainer Schulte, quotes George Steiner: "All acts of communication are acts of translation" (*Translation Review*, vol. 112, issue 1). This is true in a number of ways, and *Ez* has written about a few of them. Even non-personal communications count: what is communicated by the passing landscape to a rider in a train (per Michel Butor, Saint-Pol-Roux and others) is a syntax and a conveying of meaning, and with that, a translation. We might prioritize opening students, radically, to concepts like this in workshop. Any work of art—source language literature is just one example—is already a translation.

We generally acknowledge—and can orient translation students toward—the unfinished, imperfect aspect of any verbal art. When students see that both Steiner's and Nietzsche's remarks share this assumption, they can begin to open their process up to the freedoms translators have recently given themselves. Freedom and better translations are engendered by openness to the "heuristic aggregate."

Once again, we offer four (long) reviews of translations in the issue. And a long feature. In keeping with our house style and its relatively short scroll, we present only three other translators this time. Take note of our attention to the formerly-imprisoned Moroccan great, Abdellatif Laâbi. One of his books is reviewed, along with his wife's important memoir. The latter is from Diálogos Books, a key translation press, as is a new Laâbi book (not reviewed here), *Hope On The Fly*.

There are two publication notices as well.

FEATURED WRITERS: **Terry Ehret, John Johnson, Nancy Morales**

Nancy J. Morales, a first-generation American of Puerto Rican parents, earned her bachelor's degree from Rutgers College, a master's in teaching English as a Second Language from Adelphi University, and a doctorate in education from Teachers College at Columbia University. She has taught at Dominican University, College of Marin, Sonoma State University, and other schools, from elementary to graduate levels. Currently she is a board member for the Northern California Chapter of the Fulbright Alumni Association, and teaches Spanish to private clients.

John Johnson's poetry has appeared in many print and online journals, including *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *Clade Song*, *Triggerfish Critical Review*, and *Web Conjunctions*. He is a long-time student of the Spanish language, and has studied letter-press printing with Iota Press of Sebastopol, producing chapbooks and bilingual broadsides.

Terry Ehret, one of the founders of Sixteen Rivers Press, has published four collections of poetry, most recently *Night Sky Journey* from Kelly's Cove Press. Her literary awards include the National Poetry Series, the California Book Award, the Pablo Neruda Poetry Prize, a nomination for the Northern California Book Reviewer's Award, and five Pushcart Prize nominations. From 2004–2006, she served as the poet laureate of Sonoma County where she lives and teaches writing.

In 2020, Sixteen Rivers Press published volume one of *Plagios/Plagiarisms* by Ulalume González de León, translations by Terry Ehret, John Johnson and Nancy J. Morales. Publication of volume two is planned for 2022, and volume three for 2024.

Poetry of **Ulalume González de León:**

DARK ROOM

The room  
loses its boundaries in the room  
and grows more expansive

Everything inside  
is an intimate outside

Everything outside  
is an inside in freedom

There are no islands:  
only darkness and contagions



, it is morning  
the doors of the room opened  
the circle time  
and we are outside  
and in the room  
in the light of a lamp  
that no one lit, still  
edges and colors  
are worn out  
they imitate  
empty years of us  
and voices that will one day have lips  
steps that will one day have a passerby  
echo in the street  
of a city where no one remembers us  
meanwhile I write  
and you read  
and there are my pen and your eyes  
in mid-air  
, because together they sing  
before singing the words  
so high that we hear them  
before we hear them  
because they are running  
towards more words  
saying  
how we run towards fewer  
meanwhile I write the next line  
and you read  
and it is today  
and we are inside,

## TIMESHIFTING

a mirror's mistake  
returned to me yesterday's face  
which it failed to copy to today's face  
because it had never imagined it

I looked at it wistfully  
I—who was never a guest of his memory—to him  
a guest of my memory

and I tried to mirror him  
since I knew him

but how quickly he aged  
more than I could have imagined  
beyond  
my face today  
towards another face  
sharper and more gray

which I cannot copy  
which I could never have imagined  
which was never my guest

which looks at me wistfully  
which knows me to be a mistake of his mirror  
which is trying now to reflect me

#### ROOM WITH A SMALL WINDOW

From my room I see that room  
through a small window  
through a closed window  
that keeps the noise out

There you are alone  
Behind you a door  
If you opened it to the garden  
would you find me?

I am afraid—for so long  
you have been young  
There is no one  
behind the door  
It's been so long  
since I left the garden  
and began to cross through all the years  
that used to separate us  
until I am older than you

Now I know I can't ask you questions  
that you don't even know the answers to  
You look at me



asleep he finds himself  
dreaming that he's  
in a red room  
where he sleeps and dreams

He knows he's dreaming  
because from body  
to body he falls  
infinitely  
and without movement

And suddenly he arrives  
at the depth of his body  
at the depth of his dream  
at the dream without end  
at the cold  
family sheets  
at nobody's dream

### THIRD ROOM

A room  
disappears from its place in obscurity  
Come into my room  
You want to own it

In the meeting  
a violence alters space  
Things back then  
don't fit into things now  
The old times  
no longer know how long to last

Everything is displaced  
in a slant without when or where  
and a new room  
tries to begin and seeks  
neither yesterday nor today

But it will not begin

because I didn't come to meet myself  
I didn't come to take myself  
—although I know that I travel towards myself  
that I cross the difference  
between that room and this  
I know that living  
is only delaying meeting myself  
suspending in every night before  
the apparition of the third room

## ROOM THAT LOSES BLUE

In the blue room  
a blue bird enters:  
no one has known it.

What its flight writes  
with blue alphabet  
on blue walls—  
no one has read it.

Lord of no one,  
it has the remote  
immediacy of the now  
that closes without use—  
because He and She  
without knowing it are in Yesterday  
in Tomorrow or in Never.

Only the bird  
has already flown, both of them searching  
without knowing what they are looking for:  
something like the loss  
of a precious moment  
between Before and After.

Their tattered fragments  
—creatures of the cold—  
emerge on their lips, fingers.  
A fear is born. She says:  
“Don't close the window.”  
And He, “I won't close it.”



## DISCONNECTED ROOM

I can't remember that room  
that I only see from outside from the whiteness  
from a winter that ends at their window  
in their celebration of others

I can't remember it  
I move closer to the glass  
to the inside  
where colors begin  
Against the burning fire I see  
their two bodies from the back  
their hands joined  
and I rap on the glass  
so that they turn their faces towards me

But the rapping makes no sound  
nor have they moved  
nor do they move  
the fire, the time statues unto Themselves

(Memory  
that changes  
everything it touches  
that makes news  
of memories  
it doesn't want to return to me a room  
previously unsuspected  
stories  
that someone dreamed of living and were not lived  
beings with no existence until today  
with unedited desires  
—the same ones  
that later were canceled)

I can't remember it

I rap on the glass  
And suddenly  
placed in the center of that room  
absorbed in the flames  
already resuming their habit of moving  
squeezing your hands of long ago  
I hear someone calling at the window

and I turn toward her    toward the white street  
where someone spies us from the cold  
where someone already turns their back to us  
—mistaken stranger

## LAST ROOM

The light enters his room  
  but the walls  
of another room shine  
where he looks at the light to illuminate  
the walls of this room  
  his eyelids  
that now he closes here so as not to see  
that he no longer sees the light

## DISCONTINUITY

A bird  
while you are looking out the window  
at how January takes the garden  
  
crosses the air (and carries  
lit on its retina  
your image  
  
and flies so fast  
so many years away    so many leagues  
that it reaches a mistaken country a mistaken winter:  
  
in its snowy forest  
amid the blues of cold and silence  
the wolf stops and listens  
  
joined with the underground tides  
weavers of spring  
the distant beat of your blood in this room)  
  
Then you peer at the garden

(you lean over the distance  
newly opened between you and you

and you are afraid  
to know the country of not being together)  
An infinite moment

I wait for you (The bird changes place  
The wolf loses the faintest trace  
of your tracks in the snow) You turn

towards me and enter my eyes  
with the garden and January  
and a blackbird crossing the white sky

## PLACES

I don't know where the tree is  
that makes me so far away  
now that it comes near

I don't know if I bring the tree  
or if it carries me

A thread from the depth of its time  
pulls me and drags me

while I pull a thread  
to uproot it at the depth of its time

It arrives—the tree complete  
I myself am missing

Memory changes our places  
without moving us from where we are

**traduttori/traduttrici:**

Lleana Marin  
Daniela Hendea  
Susanna Lang

**the city**

*~~translated by Lleana Marin*

even the porcelain teeth  
you see rolling downstairs  
are livelier than me  
one measure fits all  
we drag our lethargy  
through the sea air,  
through the dozens of giant dolls  
whose bones pierce their rotten skin

the land surrounds us  
as far as we can see  
a land, cold and clogging,  
like a piece of sweet bread dipped in tea

here, everybody tries to sell something  
mascara hoses diet recipes redemption  
still we are as solitary and useless as  
movie stars' photos in the corridors

of the community center  
*everything is a kind of red*  
*our life is colored in a kind of red*  
does romania help us forget and heal ourselves?

one day, a man carrying a weapon,  
will get in the bus  
and kill me  
'cause i'm not beautiful  
'cause he hates the way i walk  
'cause he hates my clothes

when i come home  
my grandma's walker tumbles near the door  
(its iron legs  
had my mother been allowed  
would be buried with her)  
lambs break off the walls  
with long and harsh tongues  
hanging out of the corner of their mouths  
and pounce on me like wolves  
madness takes over slowly  
madness is a white mouse  
as is our fear

\*

father smirks  
on his hands

blood or drool is dripping  
he is alone, my father,  
in front of him a wall that reaches the sky  
is white.  
i get near to him  
and see the frayed collar and sleeves of his sweater  
cotton balls bulge from his eye sockets and mouth  
i shove a rusted blade into his thigh wound  
which looks like a split belly  
of a white mouse  
i've stretched a bedsheet full of holes  
over the city.

ELENA VLADAREANU (Romania)

### **Elegy for the homo child**

*~~translated by Daniela Hendea*

Men who love other men are a deviation from the humane,  
Just as women who love other women are mutations of magnolia blossoms.  
I turn to you - fearful, abnormal, monsters with timorous hearts,  
Skeletal cheekbones, pariahs with aureoles turned earrings for the right ear  
And martyrs of sexual transmitted diseases!

At the foot of the gallows where you hang, spat in the face by your parents, loathed by friends,  
I sit.

And you, too, children with fright to the bone, I embrace from the core of my own terror.

I'm not me if you're not you, and my discrepancies are all the more horrible

If they are not, too, your discrepancies, my nightmares bleaker if they don't overlap with your  
own.

\*

This dread we carry drawn on our foreheads, in our travesties,

And in fluttering of hands, or eyelashes, is the sigil of long tribulations, the pentagram of an  
ancient affliction

Neither left unsung by poets, nor unsanctified with blood

Not us, we've never been a branch of biology, or a psychiatry chapter!

Not us, we've never wanted to simply thicken the death dominions with more and  
more corpses.

We fondled in shaded places, as the earth moss enfolds the bark on the trees,  
we bit our tongues and smothered our moans among fleas and in public restrooms  
we bridled our fear and seared our innards, we muffled our tears and kept silent  
until our souls arched and, submissive, conceded hate and curse and secrecy.

I turn to you, poets from the depths of the earth, from homosexual bars and one-bedrooms!

I take you by your hand, I lead you into sunlight! Let's scream, yell across all neighborhoods and  
streets,

sing the songs of those before us, find the words to name our terror,

to make the letters visible, which, blended, will consecrate our separation from  
others,

will sever the ties of slave to master and master to slave, will shatter

the fences that conditioned our intimacy, begging for approval for every heartbeat and for every  
drop of piss!

\*

I won't deceive you: we, too, will die! With our well-sculpted bodies, or wrinkled skin,  
With our piercing eyes or with our strabismus or miopia, we'll all croak!  
Yes! And in your twink shell a demise on a black butterfly's wings is being  
woven in silence, and an army of worms is training at this very moment to devour your flesh!  
But these words and the scream of fear in us – they will not, will not die! Because  
they're  
the meeting minutes of your mute suffering, they're the open wound at the  
core of the sky, wound enlarging and deepening and deepening and deepening  
until spotted on the extraterrestrial satellites,  
by the inhabitants on another dimension, and its abomination will stigmatize  
humanity's cheek.

\*

I've got no time for sarcasm! What I say or write here has sprung from the frantic run of the  
homo child

And, for his sake, this nasty smirk looming at the corner of the mouth must be wiped.

I need to say it again and again: the crime is not embraced by them unless it's staged by a poet!

Now, take the knife, if you have two or more tricks to turn, if you can find them –

I'll wait for you at the end of the line. I'll have the typewriter, fountain pen, paper with me!

\*

Hey, you, child of those years we struggled to live, tell me if there's anyone else h e r e!

Hey, you, child of heterosexual parents, you, standing nude in the window cracked open,

and surveying the roofs with flesh-eating lust, child of sad news,

if you get there sooner,

wait for me!

Hey, you, from the village where you suffocate, enamored with your father's arms, his protective



thighs,

you, wiping with your shirt sleeve the lights off objects,

wait for me!

Hey, you, nesting in you a fault older than your great-grandparents, you, who are not allowed to be,

wait for me!

### **New Year's Eve in F key**

It's been snowing a century's worth

In my neighborhood, in Bucharest,

On my street and on the alleys around.

Gods put on coats puffed with terracotta

Collect the world's samovars, cram those among themselves -

Wrap their hands around each other, to keep warm. To keep company.

On New Year's Eve it was just cold. And it wasn't snowing.

The steam off your mouth set the linden trees on Pake Protopopescu  
abloom.

The joints we passed under the pawnshop's rainbow-colored eave

Were sweeter and purer.

Later, when you stretched under blankets,

In my double bed,  
You shivered, embraced me and elbowed duality –  
Cherub lost in Nirvana.

Your eyes alone piercing my chest,  
like two heat-glowing nails of santal.

Followed by fireworks,  
then a deep and hollow sleep, as a separation, followed.

After that, we broke up in earnest.

But only till The Judgment Day,  
When we'll walk up hand in hand, just like after a wasted New Year's Eve party,

To count for ourselves the blossomed linden trees in the dead of winter, the pawnshop, rainbows,  
cigarette, kisses and beds. And then die.

Then we'll both be spirits.

Then we'll both cease to exist.

And, then and only then, nothing, of all the things that happened,  
will hurt anymore.

### **Litany of homosexual poets**

(Prologue in heaven)

Beneath the portico, before the palestra, he leans against a fresca:  
Athena caresses Gorgona on her shield, her gaze distracted by the milestone.  
The sun rises from the Mediterranean's cauldron – a timid marble.  
It's as repugnant as only barbarians can muster.

/The Greeks always spread rumors about him at their party meetings for this./  
Seated on his feeble knee, as on a cracked marble throne,  
Lysis braids the philosopher's beard.  
At an arrow's throw, Charmides bares his soul to the skin.  
The old man loses his composure, suppresses his instincts.  
Mumbles in verse something from Homer.

Someday, he ponders, they'll depict me on the walls of Christian churches!  
Wrap Charmides in a blanket, Socrates, or else his ovaries will shiver!

Chew a date, digest the bunches of grapes hanging off Alcibiades's temples!  
A ruthless disease, like the one you contracted  
could only be passed on through unprotected erotic contact.  
You alone grasp death, Socrates!  
Teach us to die it well ourselves.

RAZVAN ANDREI (Romania)

**Three poems (from Drafts of love)**

*~~translated by Susanna Lang*

A loving grammar  
when I say *I'm thinking of you*  
I am not  
the subject of the sentence

Before I call you  
with my full confession  
I set up  
the playing field  
of my silence  
wise words settle  
on the bench  
I will only speak them  
in case of a breakdown

Your hands are a bowl  
of sweet bonbons  
I am the child  
outside the shop window

## SOUAD LABBIZE

### PUBLICATION NOTICES:

ARCHITECTS OF THE IMAGINARY, Marta López-Luaces. Translated by Gregory Racz. Arlington, VA: Gival Press, 2022. 84 pp. \$20.00

The author's *Arquitectos de lo imaginario* follows six other works. Adventurous, provocative work from Spain. The book is beautifully (while embracing some technical challenges) translated by Racz—known, among other achievements, for his nine translations of Eduardo Chirinos.

TWILIGHT. (A Contemporary Pastoral Poet of China). Zhang Lian. Translated by Keming Liu. Floating World Editions, 2022. 272 pp.

The eminent Dr. Liu, whose work has appeared in *Ezra*, presents important contemporary poetry.

### REVIEWS:

THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE, Abdellatif Laâbi, Translated by Annie Jamison. Fruita, CO: Lithic Press, 2021.

In his remarkable work *Le Principe d'incertitude* (2016), poet Abdellatif Laâbi crystallizes *the work* of poetry in a few lines as follows : (p. 76).

*Poésie*

Quel honneur

et quel fardeau !

Cela te fait penser

à ce que t'avait confié

l'un de tes anciens compagnons  
au sujet d'un livre qu'il projetait d'écrire  
– et qu'il n'a jamais écrit –  
Un livre dont le titre présumé  
« Traduit du chien »  
s'est gravé dans ta mémoire  
tant tu l'avais trouvé génial

Here, Laâbi hones in on the essence of *translation* as well as poetry : the *honor* and the *burden* of carrying meaning forward and communicating it as brilliantly in the second language as it was in the original. English readers once again have the honor of glimpsing another facet of the brilliance of Abdellatif Laâbi's poetry<sup>1</sup>, thanks to the recent translation of his work *Le Principe d'incertitude* (Abdellatif Laâbi 2016) by Annie Jamison (2021). The original French work is a piercing expression of hope, despair, courage and aching questions, all informed by Laâbi's life experience. A Moroccan poet, journalist, novelist, translator and dissident, Laâbi's political activism led to his imprisonment and torture over more than eight years, and his exile from Morocco in 1985. The translation of such a critically acclaimed and powerful voice as Laâbi's, while no doubt an honor for any translator, also carries with it much of the burden the poet describes above in *Le Principe d'incertitude*. There is, for example, the question of how to remain faithful to the depth of emotion expressed in the original, and of how to transmit the intensity of

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<sup>1</sup> Laâbi's work has been extensively translated. See, e.g.: *The Rule of Barbarism* (New York: Island Position, 2012), *The Bottom of the Jar* (New York: Archipelago Books, 2013) and *Beyond the Barbed Wire* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 2016), all translated by André Naffis-Sahely; See also: *In Praise of Defeat*, foreword by Pierre Joris, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Archipelago Books, 2016), See further, *Perishable Poems*, Translation and foreword by Peter Thompson (New Orleans: Diálogos Books, 2019), *Fragments of a Forgotten Genesis* Translated by Nancy and Gordon Hadfield, (Nottingham, UK: Leaf Press, 2009), *The World's Embrace*, Translated by Anne George, Edris Makward, Victor Reinking and Pierre Joris, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2003), *Hope On The Fly*, translated by Peter Thompson, (New Orleans: Diálogos Books, 2022).

Laâbi's message with the same elegance, nuance, shading and artistry of the original French text (formidable tasks for even the most experienced of translators). Then there is the question of how the translator should balance the ethics of remaining faithful to the original language of the poet, honoring its *étrangeté* vis-a-vis the second language, while at the same time opening the text to readers of English, for whom Laâbi's work might otherwise remain completely inaccessible in linguistic, cultural and experiential terms. Jamison's English translation certainly achieves the goal of making this extraordinary text accessible to readers of English who are not merely unfamiliar with French, but perhaps also unfamiliar with Laâbi's life and work generally and the historical/cultural context in which he writes. That in itself is a noteworthy accomplishment for a young translator, and a gift to readers.

This English translation likewise underscores (perhaps unwittingly, at times) the performative impact of the translational process and of reading translated texts. The power of translation is its ability to transform text as much as readers, creating a new work, new reading experience and new reader response. That power, moreover, is fraught with risk. One example of the perhaps unconscious exercise of such performative power in the English version of *The Uncertainty Principle* arises in a particular passage where Laâbi, in the original, addresses his readers directly. Laâbi confronts those whose momentary, shallow, simplistic, or even quasi-prurient interest in reading the horrific details of his suffering might cheapen his experience, or might flatten it out so as to align it more with their own agenda or sensibilities. He wastes no time in chiding them in French, warning them against superficiality as follows : *A quoi bon / penses-tu en ton for intérieur / Tout cela est si loin / le plat est complètement refroidi / Maintenant / si vous tenez à votre inédit / autant que je frappe fort / et comble au-delà de vos espérances / votre insane curiosité / Alors / retenez ceci : / dans cet infra-monde où j'ai survécu plus que vécu / les plus*

*grandes souffrances / que j'ai endurées / ce n'est pas « l'ennemi » qui me les a infligées !* This

English translation treats those lines as follows:

What's the point?

You think to yourself

All of that is so far in the past

The plate has gone cold

Now

*if you are so eager to relate*

*what you left unsaid*

I may as well hit hard and

*satisfy your most ardent wishes*

So

remember this:

in that under-world

where I survived more than lived,

the greatest sufferings I endured

were not inflicted on me



by "the enemy",<sup>2</sup>

Leaving aside for the moment the inherent incongruity in "if *you* are so eager to relate / what *you* left unsaid"<sup>3</sup> as translation for *si vous tenez à votre inédit*, given the context of the superficiality of the reader's incessant desire for *novelty* (here, in the form of violence) that the poet is critiquing, one thing becomes clear about the English version of this passage: the words "satisfy your most ardent wishes" effectively take the wind out of the sails of the French expression, leaving the reader with a sanitized version of what Laâbi in fact labels the fulfillment, beyond one's wildest dreams, of the reader's *insane curiosity*. In that regard it is also noteworthy that the exclamation point in the original after " « l'ennemi » qui me les a infligées ! " is literally lost in translation. In this way, the reader is permitted via the translated text to persist in her superficiality and is given a pass, in a sense : she does not need to confront the "insanity" of her own voyeuristic interest in Laâbi's agony as a kind of novelty. Instead, she can view her desire to know the gruesome details as an appropriate, if perhaps "ardent", *wish*. Herein lies the struggle for every translator of poetry: translational choices can sometimes flatten or deflate the intensity of an original poetic text, which in turn can create in its readers a level of comfort or self-satisfaction in their response to it that is in fact the opposite of what the poet intends in the original.

There are other moments where this translation shys away from the intensity of the poet's angry gaze; why is not entirely clear. For though a softening of the language might make it more

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<sup>2</sup> Italics added.

<sup>3</sup> One has to question the choice of translation here as it is difficult to follow given the tone and context of the whole poem. What could the reader possibly have to "relate" to the poet at this juncture? Laâbi makes no reference to any ongoing exchange between himself and the reader in the text. Moreover, even if such an exchange could be said arguably to be taking place in this work, why would the reader suddenly be eager to relate what she supposedly left unsaid to begin with?

palatable to a reader unfamiliar with Laâbi's life and work, the approach has the effect of flattening the imagery itself ; of *pulling the punches* his poetry packs. One example is as follows, where Laâbi rejects outright the corruption he has witnessed. He calls power-hungry bureaucrats and politicians much more than the mere "*fools of the farce*" they become in the translation : (*Je suis*) / *Las* / *de la pornographie partisane* / *Des suivis et des suiveurs* / *Des imposteurs* / *et des dindons de la farce* ... *Las du droit divin du plus fort* ... The translation treats those lines thus: (*I am*) / *Weary* / *of partisan pornography* / *of leaders and followers* / *Of imposters* / *and the fools of the farce* ... / *Weary of stronger divine right* (which should be more closely translated as *the divine right of the strongest*) This reader might have expected such no-holds-barred language in the original to be translated in more acerbic terms, particularly since *les dindons de la farce* in the political context is more akin to *suckers, patsies, fall guys, laughing stock* or even *butts of the joke*. Readers may be left sensing another opportunity missed in the translation of this passage.

It is nevertheless true that Jamison's translation has, broadly speaking, opened yet another door for readers of English to the life experience and writings of one of today's most well known and highly acclaimed Moroccan poets. Laâbi's poems challenge readers to examine the depth of emotion he expresses in relating his painful personal suffering. His work is, then, not for the faint of heart. *Le Principe d'incertitude* cries out, in every sense, for a much wider readership, which this English version may perhaps begin to usher in. In that spirit, this text, in both its original and translated form, is certainly worthy of further scholarship and analysis, which will add insight into Abdellatif Laâbi's exceptional body of work.

~~Annetta Riley

CONVERSATIONS WITH LI HE, Gabriel Rosenstock. Translated by Garry Bannister, with illustrations by Tania Stokes. Merrick, NY: Cross-Cultural Communications, 2021. 107 pages.

*Conversations with Li He* exercises the power of apostrophe; that figure of speech wherein the persona directly addresses someone (or something) that cannot respond in reality. The Greek ἀποστροφή means “turning away.” It is fair to ask what the poet turns away from, but let’s first look at what the poet turns towards.

The Irish poet wrote this collection in 2019, while battling a serious illness. During his hospitalization, he was given *The Collected Poems of Li He*, (a poet from the time of China’s Tang Dynasty), and, according to the book’s dedication, the two quickly became “old friends.”

What is immediately presented to the reader is the impossibility of a poet today talking with a poet born in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. Apostrophe allows one to transcend time, making it an inherently poetic device. (And time is only one of the many things it can transcend.) In order to converse with an old friend, the poet must turn away from the flow of time.

*And now*

“And now

as these lines I jot down

I am at least more than twice your age

when you died

More than a thousand years ago, would you believe it?

The Chang Jiang river ceaselessly winding its way”

What next might strike the reader is the distance – both physical and cultural – between Ireland and China. The poet acknowledges the gulf – “I without Chinese / and you who have no Irish...” (from *Mushrooms*) – but elsewhere he acknowledges that “talk is cheap.” In the same poem, *Cuckoo*, he adds, “We should all go home / over the hills and far away.” He goes on to finish that poem with an allusion to Lorca: “*lejana y solo*.” Lorca famously championed the notion of *duende*, itself so closely tied to death, which the poet seems to suggest with the image of a far away home we all go to. For this reader, in this context, the Biblical Enoch is brought to mind; a man whose life came to an end by his being translated (Hebrews 11:15, KJV).

Distance, in its myriad forms, is a recurring theme: “Does he know that you are distantly related to him? / (extremely distantly)” (from *The Emperor*); “Li He / your mountain home far in the distance” (from *On your leaving Chang-an*); “Don’t disappear off on me” (from *Talking with the trees*; a poem with

apostrophe in the title). There's a hint that distance can be overcome with translation, as if it's a form of transcendence.

Reading Irish poetry, translated into English, might bring to mind the often bloody history, that stretches several centuries, between the two island neighbors.

“While you're listening to a war-ballad

you hear the cracking of helmets

the cracking of bones

the crying of women in the slaughter

you having no idea

that you'd also, Li, have to

discard the brush of poesy.

It is bloody war again.”

From the poem *Sword*, (above,) we are reminded that war is universally signified by such wordless sounds.

*Chirping of birds*

“Would the birds of the air sing more sweetly  
if they were schooled?”

Li He might respond by wondering if poetic language represents the schooling of song, and answer that, if it offers a way to turn further from the unmusical and wordless sounds of war, presumably towards peace, it is more sweet, and thus preferable.

The first two poems of *Conversation* echo two distinct eras in English poetry. It’s hard to read this – “The morning stretching out before you / like a courtesan under a satin sheet,” from *Out Riding* – and not recall the following couplet from T. S. Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*: “when the evening is spread out against the sky / like a patient etherized upon a table.”

It is worth remarking on the collection’s title at this point. The root of converse is from the Latin *conversari*, “to associate with.” But if broken down into con- and verse, you get a shortened version of *contra* – “in opposition, against” – combined with *versus*, whose well-known meaning is “to turn.” When using con- to mean “with,” (as opposed to “in opposition,”) it’s actually a variation of the prefix com-, meaning “in association,” or, “together,” itself a variant of the Latin preposition *cum*. And it’s interesting to remember the name for the poet’s method of conversing, ἀποστροφή, is itself a combination of the Greek words for “away” and “to turn.”

*Prufrock* is the poem that's said to have ended romanticism, and ushered in modernity. I couldn't help but wonder if the poet, reading Li He – a “crazy poet” (or, put another way, one who's mad, bad and dangerous to know) – while a patient in a hospital (and potentially being etherized upon a table), had some Romantic-era poets in mind as he wrote. Thinking of Li He as a Chinese Byron – or of Byron as an English Li He – does not seem such a stretch, when considering their reputations. This might be one way a person gets translated in life.

In *Eternal Dance*, we read: “A stone unicorn, a carved dragon / being eroded by the weather / it is only the Dao / everything is dancing / [...] nothing will survive.” The persona contemplates some handiwork, like the Grecian urn of Keats and Shelley's *Ozymandias*. (As a side note, the famous line of Keats' – “heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter” – surely was in the mind of Robert Graves, when he translated a Greek proverb from Suetonius' *The Twelve Caesars* as “Unheard melodies are never sweet.”) In this collection, the first and only reference to a religion is the above reference to Daoism. I found myself asking it, at one or two points, What about Babel?

In the second poem of the collection – *The waters of autumn* – we get the following lines: “Restless, radiant, capricious / are April's showers.” After hearing Eliot revised in the collection's first poem, my ears were primed for more; he turned Chaucer's “Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote...” into “April is the cruellest month, breeding...” This reference to spring, in a poem about autumn, brings to mind the turning of the seasons and the turning that occurs within an individual tradition. (And that sentence may bring to mind Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, and chirping of The Byrds.) Six centuries separate Chaucer's Middle English from the modern tongue of Eliot; an intra-traditional distance that allusion, like apostrophe, can overcome. Allusion, from the Latin *ludere*, for “to play,” being joined with a variant of the prefix *ad-*, meaning “toward.”

The poems are accompanied by Tania Stokes' illustrations. Partly abstract, and partly representative, the images are only in black and white, with various shades of gray. In the afterglow of the collection's work on building bridges between nations and times, one can look back and read the black and white markings as distinct peoples and places, with the gray as a metaphor for the way these colors (standing in for cultures) might eventually touch, bleeding into each other, sometimes creatively. They allude, as well, to the yin and the yang of Daoism, mentioned by the poet in *Eternal Dance*; the black and white markings dancing on each page, eternally turning into something new together. The poet provides symbolic imagery in the same vein: "Yellow bees going home / their nectar gathered silently / unbeknown to the world" (pollinators being poet-like; from *Yellow bees going home*); "We also see them, Li He, changes / change after change / a thousand years – gone in a puff!" (from *Changes*). I found myself asking the book, Is this how a culture is translated; how a people can turn away from oblivion? By turning to and playing with others?

As the poet says in *Plum falling* – on the topics of "poetry / singing / dancing" – "Impermanence begets them." (And Leonardo da Vinci famously said, "Painting is poetry that is seen rather than felt, and poetry is painting that is felt rather than seen.") The painter, too, can make bridges.

Reading *Conversations with Li He* this way, I'm reminded of Ezra Pound's early 20<sup>th</sup> century efforts. The artworks that accompany the poems often brought to mind his famous Haiku-like imagist piece:

*In a Station of the Metro*



“The apparition of these faces in this crowd:

Petals on a wet, black bough.”

Ezra Pound, it will be recalled, conversed with Walt Whitman in his poem, *A Pact*: “I have detested you long enough. / [...] It was you that broke the new wood, / Now is a time for carving. / We have one sap and one root – / Let there be commerce between us.”

These poems seem to make this connection as well. In *Is it yourself?*, we read:

“A tree under the rain

weeping under the rain

branches being braced by the wind

is that you there, Li?

go on off home with yourself

What home can a tree have

and it stuck in the same place forever

or what home could a cloud have: stopping

moving, moving, moving, stopping.”

The very next poem is *On your leaving Chang-an*: “Chang-an behind you now / the largest city in the world.” Maybe the poet, at the outset, turns away from the flow of time, a distance-maker (among many), to depart on train tracks of the imagination, to go (as the title of the first poem says) out riding.

This collection takes the reader many places; even the Gobi Desert is mentioned. I recommend listening in on the poet playing, crossing the bridges that turn up along the way. You won’t be disappointed by where you go; it may feel strangely like home.

~~*Jake Sheff*

. LIQUEUR OF ALOE, Jocelyne Laâbi, Translated by Terence Golding, New Orleans: Diálogos Books, 2021. 236 pp.

When Bill Lavender approached me to write a review of the beautiful translation of Jocelyne Laâbi’s *Liqueur of Aloe* by Terence Golding, I hesitated at first because it required that I venture into my own past, a past I had left behind many, many years ago. After some thought however, I felt myself to be under a moral obligation. Summoning my courage, I found myself immersed in the web of a past darkness that I still carry with me.

Jocelyne organizes the narration beautifully in order to construct the book according to memory’s precise specifications. In *Liqueur of Aloe*, she puts together a recollection of provocative referential instances—not as a historical curiosity, social document, or piece of ideological rhetoric, but rather as an emotionally charged account of an ordeal that she has lived through in a Morocco that has changed since—a process that often leads her to offset the narration by invoking a tone of nostalgic recollection.

What emerges are history and characters who have long resisted erasure, drawing the reader back into the era of “*Years of Lead*,” that is, the reign of King Hassan II.

The Morocco that Jocelyne reveals is one of dizzying dimensions. She takes the reader into the maze of her personal memory as well as collective memory, and especially back to that dual memory with the poet Abdellatif Laâbi, with whom she shared a life as wife, comrade, and strong support for the poet who had lived through the Moroccan hell of the 1970s and 1980s. When Laâbi was arrested in 1972, he was subjected, along with many of his comrades—prisoners of opinion—to physical and psychological torture, and was forced to spend almost ten years in jail, especially in the central prison in Kenitra.

I can still remember the black and white photograph of Laâbi, which was widely published in Moroccan and international media, with his round black beard, wearing a white shirt and black sunglasses throughout his years of imprisonment. I was a student at the Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University in Fez, participating in tumultuous demonstrations, especially involving the UNEM (*Union National des Etudiants Marocains*, a students’ organization). We often made copies of his poems and hung them on the wall of the University, and would secretly share copies of his famous culturally, intellectually, politically, and ideologically committed magazine, *Souffles*, as well as his poetry and novels.

At that time, Abdellatif Laâbi was in jail, but was always a presence among us as students, activists, members, or sympathizers with the leftist movement, especially the radical left, he being one of its prominent icons. The ideas of the most important icons usually had political and theoretical dimensions, while Laâbi, who was imprisoned mainly for his political views and his responsibilities in the *Ila al Amam* (Forward) movement, was always regarded as an imprisoned poet. Maybe it was that status, namely being a poet, that was the primary motivation for all the demonstrations, lectures, meetings and all the articles that were published in Moroccan and International newspapers, the factor that prompted the universal support for Laâbi and his comrades and caused the Moroccan political establishment not a little embarrassment at the time by staining its human rights image. The national scandal prompted by this

campaign accelerated the process of freedom for Laâbi before he had spent his tenth year in jail along with some of his comrades, and before the government released all political prisoners a few years later.

From such a perspective, I can't read Jocelyne's writing and this book in particular, outside the framework of what Laâbi represents in my own personal recollection. However, Jocelyne, a French citizen, chooses to connect her personal name to Laâbi, something that has become an integral part of her name and identity; their fate is connected, and they have become one entity, to the extent that, in Morocco as well as France, we rarely meet one without the other. They both represent a special, exceptional, yet different couple in their shared life and writings. It is from this history that *Liqueur of Aloe* emerges to summarize this shared destiny. Throughout the book we learn the story of Jocelyne: her arrival in Morocco and meeting Laâbi, at which point their destiny is sealed—when she chooses to live with him and embrace his ordeal as her own, turning it into a poetic, political, and humanistic cause. She carries Laâbi's name through the corridors of international events, making it her own cause as a spouse, comrade, and mother of their children. She is patient and persistent. She regularly visits him in jail and fights alongside the families of other political prisoners.

*Liqueur of Aloe* has been one of my most memorable, haunting, vivid reading experiences. Jocelyne has built her own literary experience alongside Laâbi's and honed it through the many long fights and battles that she has waged for Laâbi's sake. One can say that Laâbi owes his freedom and life to Jocelyne. To which I can add that she in turn owes him her literary status and even her humanistic horizon because she has tied her destiny to his, and both have become one in life and writing.

One has to be “crazy” to tie one's life and destiny to a poet. It is like tying your life to the waves, dust, the blueness of the sky, rain, and clouds. Even crazier is to tie yourself to an activist who has chosen the people's cause, to be an activist, leader, ideologue for a radical, secret leftist movement, which the political system has regarded as “illegal.” The movement in question is neither reformist nor moderate, but rather designed to remove the political system.

The American (Anglophone) reader will not only feel closer to a woman's experience, and that of an important and great poet, but will also gain a valuable perspective on the history of modern Morocco. In addition to its literary value, this book is a testimony to an experience and the relationship between poetry and politics., It has its own historical value and should be considered as an essential document in any approach to the issue of human rights in Morocco.

It is not a coincidence that Jocelyne wrote this biographical work in a period of the historical development of Moroccan literature that witnessed a series of testimonial and recollective writings penned by a number of political and military prisoners. Mostly men and very few women, they wrote about their experiences with the ordeals that they endured during the *Years of Lead*, from the end of the 1960s to the '90s, when a general pardon was issued in July 1994.

Such is the impact of *Liqueur of Aloe* that I have been awed by all the events that Jocelyne has brought back. I have felt a personal chemistry, as if the book was written for me. To the amazing translator, Terence Golding, I express my heartfelt thanks for the quality and fidelity of his rendering of the original text.

~~Mbarek Sryfi

ÚLTIMO DIA/LAST DAY, Ximena Gómez. Translated by George Franklin and Ximena Gómez, with photographs by Hayika Maras. Weston, FL: katakana editores, 2019. 113 pages.

The titular last day is significant for its ambiguity; that is, for its ability to signify both the last day of an individual's life on earth and the last day of all life on earth, when, according to some traditions, all of us are judged and can be together again.

Throughout the collection, the poet relies much on imagery; most notably on color: “And I see the red curtain / From my room...” (from *Paramnesia*); “In that room with blue walls, / ... Yellow afternoon light on your face, / ... With two red anthuriums in your lap – / Your hands so white” (from *Photograph*). It’s helpful to recall the poet is also a practicing psychologist, for in her profession paramnesia refers to 1) a distortion of memory in which fact and fantasy are confused, and 2) the inability to recall the correct meaning of a word.

“Something flutters

Behind a curtain.

The sound bristles my skin,

And I see the red curtain

From my room when I was a child.

Between the pleats

A cockroach was falling,

Drunk with poison.”

*Paramnesia* provides a Proustian opening to the collection, a curtain performing the work of a madeleine. And it has shades of Emily Dickinson’s “I heard a fly buzz – when I died.” Specific images recur: “A faint light settles through the fog, / ... Here, close by, on the other side, grass / Barely seen through the fog...” (from *Are You Cold?*) and “Your eyes, obscured by the fog of cataracts” (also from *Photograph*); “...the lights / On the dark glass, fireworks on shadows...” (from *Seven Poems, Seven Shadows*) and “The lights sparkling like fireworks in the puddles” (from *A Revelry of Birds*). There are echoes of Emily

Dickinson, famously death- (and fame-) obsessed Emily Dickinson, sprinkled throughout. In the poem *Flip-Flops*, we read: “Pigeons were fluttering on the roof of the house, / Closed, dark, apparently lived in by nobody.” Emily might reply, “I’m Nobody! Who are you? / Are you – Nobody – too?”

In the same poem, a ghazal where the repetend is “nobody” (or its capitalized form), we begin to hear echoes of William Blake, who wrote the poem *To Nobodaddy* (Nobodaddy presumably is whom his tradition teaches will judge and sort on mankind’s last day.) We also get a charming allusion to W.H. Auden’s *Funeral Blues*, wherein he commands the reader to “Stop all the clocks,” when we read “No more footsteps, no more clocks, no more murmurs... / Pigeons broke in, invading the house that belonged to Nobody.”

The pigeons recur later in the collection with their own poem, *Ruined House with Pigeons*. That style of title, borrowed from still life painting, is used again for *Happiness with Fly*; this fly is “fluttering” (a recurring verb) on the tablecloth.

When the persona says, “I wish I were that female / Lying lazily on the sidewalk / With my black, oily feathers. / Then I wouldn’t be mourning for you” (in *A Revelry of Birds*), we are reminded of Catullus, who, when he sees his sweetheart’s pain relieved by playing with her songbird, wishes he could take his sweetheart’s place. In a collection haunted by Dickinson, one could also read those lines as being spoken by a persona so bereft of hope, he or she actually longs to be that feathered thing (as opposed to a featherless biped). And in the poem *Zapateado*, when we read “as / On a half-lit stage, you / Reappear in your armchair” (addressed to someone who has passed), we wouldn’t be misguided if we recall Hamlet addressing the ghost of his father.

Repetition succeeds in arresting the attention when used artistically. In the poem *Dorado*, the second line of each couplet repeats “golden,” but not always in the same position (e.g. the penultimate word). In each couplet of *Oedipal Triad*, a second-person’s dog returns after every first line’s break, which is charming. Later in the collection, this poem and others lend an additional meaning to the collection’s title, as it is suggested, by choice of subject matter, that the poet also had in mind the last day of a romantic relationship. *La petite mort*, indeed.

Other poems are elevated by playful and punning juxtapositions. In *Living Room Set*, we read: “After / She was cremated, / I got rid of the living room set. / ... The blinds / Remained open.” The same poem utilizes paradox for an interesting effect: “No one saw her. I didn’t see her either. / But there she was, quite small, subtle, / Omnipresent...” In the poem *Eden*, we see how life on earth is tragicomic, and the space is shared by elements both high and low: “A fly courts / The feces of a horse. / God is smiling.” (And when you consider this image in connection with the idea that last day refers to a romance’s – when you consider its meaning as a visual metaphor – you, too, might smile.)

After awhile, the repetition feels less creative and more due to a lack of daring in diction. The imagery becomes locked in the mundane and the domestic, and in no time predictability sets in. *Zapateado*, elevated by the parent’s ghostly presence, also suffers from melodrama and cliché:

“Sometimes at night

With a book in your lap,

You’d fall asleep in your



Green velvet chair.

Like on that Sunday

... a cup of water

Dropped from your

Sleeping hands and

Shattered to bits

Across the floor.”

What the poet uses successfully in some places fails in others. The poem *Brown* is such a literal description of autumn in Chicago that, despite the imagery and repetition it employs, it is mostly bathetic. *Early Snow* does much of the same in a different season. We get more bathos from *Red Geraniums*, wherein the poet juxtaposes a scene of her parents pre-separation with a present-day intimate moment from her own (or the persona's) romantic relationship:

“My mother had heartburn, she was cold.

We grew up, my father built a house,

Then he left one day.

*Now, I sleep in bed with my lover.*

...

Sometimes I have heartburn during the night.

And I am cold under the sheets.

And I dream my lover leaves the house

Like my father did.

*But now, my lover sleeps next to me.”*

*Left Over from Dinner* is a catalogue of remains, but this piece turns from still life to poetry in the final lines: “Two pairs of hands / By the table’s edge, / Brushing against each other, / Two pairs of eyes / Risking / What the hands can’t say.” It turns to poetry and comes to life via synecdoche. A similar poem mentioned above – *Happiness with Fly* – is saved in a similar way: while being mostly a catalogue of postprandial tabletop ruins, we’re also given “an egg wait[ing]” and “the sun staring”; inanimate objects animated via poetry.

The abundance of color and allusions to still life painting are certainly borne from an affection for the visual arts. The collection is divided into three parts – it’s in the third, with its title, *Under the sheets, we spoke in whispers*, where the connection between last day and a romantic relationship is made clear – and in Part III the poet alludes to big name painters: Matisse, Modigliani. And the persona clearly has mixed feelings about the male partners in romantic pairings. In *The Box in the Closet*, we read about a bird “Apparently bleeding. / He was screaming / To every female / In the neighborhood / To come fuck.” It brings to mind the lowly and libidinous Sweeney, from T.S. Eliot’s *Sweeney Among the Nightingales*. But

images of water recur as she speaks tenderly about her lover's age and manliness: "He's in his bathrobe, gray hair uncombed, / His beard unshaven, not yet showered – / ...I drink the drops [of coffee] left in his mustache / Because I'm thirsty and untie the / Knot of his robe" (from *Bathrobe*); "And on the pillow / Your boyish hair, gray / With brown curls at the neck. / The sheets had the / Scent of coconut, your skin / Fresh out of the shower (from *One Monday*); "The night of the hurricane / The sound of rain against / The glass woke me. / ...I thought I saw in your gray hair the glow / That remained in the sky" (from *The Night of the Hurricane*). Returning to the title's ambiguity, if a reader considers last day as referring to both a relationship's and the world's, in connection with the possibility of being together again after the latter, then the concept of the former might be negated; it might lose its finality: this is dependent on the nature of the ending, whether it was voluntary or not, I would imagine; Skeeter Davis is no widow when she sings, "Don't they know it's the end of the world? It ended when you said, 'Goodbye.'"

It's interesting that, in *In the Next Room* (the final poem in Part II), the persona mentions Bach, whose creative process is famous for using reinvention, and who famously closes his musical pieces with "SDG," that is, *Soli Deo Gloria*: For the glory of God alone. It's interesting because, when reading *Último día/Last Day*, one is presented with many endings, and signs of impending endings, but they are so mixed up with the stuff of fresh beginnings, that it raises the question of whether anything ever truly ends – particularly in a collection whose aesthetic effects depend so much on repetition, (or let's say, for sake of argument, on *recycling*), as music does, but of image and word – it raises the question of whether there is, in fact, some inexhaustible creative force after all.

~~Jake Sheff

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