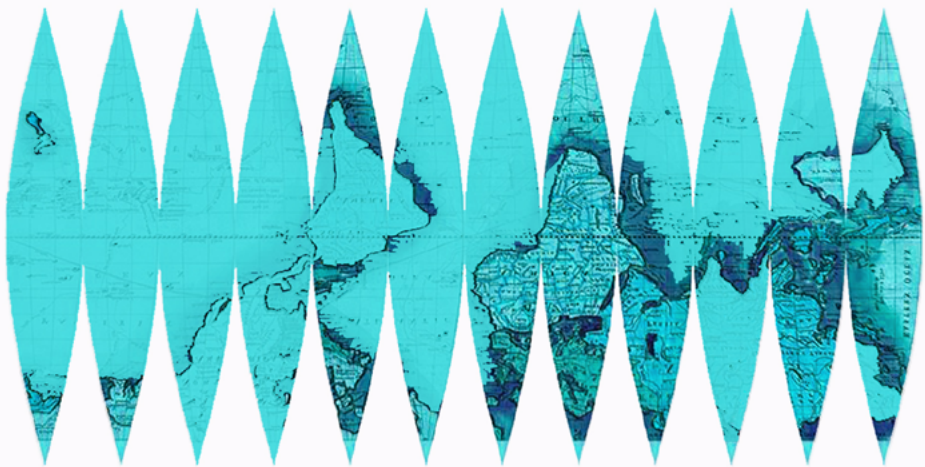


THE WORLD OVER



TRANSLATORS SPEAK ON NEW POETRY IN TRANSLATION

BY H. L. HIX

featuring:

Don Mee Choi (re. Kim Hyesoon)

Ferial Ghazoul (re. Muhammad Afifi Matar)

Johannes Göransson (re. Aase Berg)

David Keplinger (re. Carsten René Nielsen)

Peter H. Lee (re. *Echoing Song*)

Alexis Levitin (re. Astrid Cabral)

George Messo (re. Ilhan Berk)

Wayne Miller (re. Moikom Zeqo)

Jennifer Moxley (re. Jacqueline Risset)

Idra Novey (re. Paulo Henriques Britto)

Ravi Shankar (re. *Language for a New Century*)

Carolyn Wright (re. Taslima Nasrin)

Linda Stern Zisquit (re. Yona Wallach)



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ESSAY PRESS LISTENING TOUR



#22

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As the Essay Press website re-launches, we have commissioned some of our favorite conveners of public discussions to curate conversation-based chapbooks. Overhearing such dialogues among poets, prose writers, critics and artists, we hope to re-envision how Essay can emulate and expand upon recent developments in trans-disciplinary small-press cultures.

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Introduction: Translation as Demopoesis

—H. L. Hix

One of the bumper stickers on my neighbor's pickup reads: "I love my country. It's the government I'm afraid of." To regard that bromide as something I can affirm, I have to interpret it along these lines: "I affirm democracy as a regulative ideal, though I lament that in practice we fall short of realizing that ideal."

One reason for such falling-short is the absence from our public dialogue of a correlative ideal, one without which democracy is impossible to achieve, namely *demopoesis*. The *demos* cannot be -cratic, cannot rule itself, if it be not -poetic, if in other words it is not making itself, and specifically if it is not making itself over in a continuous *remaking*.

Demopoesis is the charge incumbent upon a collective. It parallels the charge incumbent upon an individual that "you must revise your life." The capacity to fulfill such a

charge depends upon the expansion and ennoblement of a sense of possibility. Pascale Casanova claims, in *The World Republic of Letters*, that in its “true nature” translation is not “a mere exchange of one language for another,” but is instead “a form of literary recognition.” Her claim hints at why translation offers a very prototype of *demopoiesis*. We (the “we” of any collective) will not be able to expand and ennoble our sense of possibility without recognition, a recognition that consists in acknowledging some range of alternatives, learning who we might be by regarding our own experience in light of the experiences of others. Literary translation is not the only practice that advances such regard, but no practice advances it more.

The translators who speak here articulate translation’s advance of regard in various ways, but they make repeatedly clear the importance of translation. Don Mee Choi observes how translation contests the transformation of displacement into worthlessness. Ferial Ghazoul shows translation at work revealing to the attentive reader the presence and significance of plurality. And so on, with wisdom from each translator, and insights on every page.

Robert Bringhurst contends that the translator’s job is “to honor what one finds by paying it attention: drawing it into the human domain in such a way that human life

is shaped around it. It is, in other words, to enlarge and refresh our sense of the world and to shape our place within it.” The conversations that follow record translators paying honor to what they have found and paid attention to, and to what they have offered us for our attention.



Don Mee Choi on Kim Hyesoon's *Mommy Must Be a Fountain of Feathers*

H. L. Hix: The speaker in “Face” speculates that “Maybe I am the hostage of an absent being.” I suspect it’s always misleading to seize on one moment in a poem and seek in it some “message” about the whole poem or collection, but is there some meaningful sense in which one might take this as a characterization of the state all the poems resist, a figure for the “blackened space” your introduction identifies as the space in which all Koreans, but especially Korean women, live? Given the neocolonial relationship you note, in what ways would you expect American readers to find in the poems similarities with their own experience, and in what ways would you expect them to find contrasts to their own experience?

Don Mee Choi: I think it might be best for me to begin by saying something about Kim Hyesoon’s hell. I often think of Kim Hyesoon’s poems being played out on a theatrical stage that has no regards for the conventions

of linear narrative time. There is no before or after hell. All is hell. Each poem may be a single miniature stage platform that piles up like “teeth with teeth, fingernails with fingernails.” Kim’s hell is rooted in the Korean shaman narrative *The Abandoned* [*paridegi*], in which a daughter is abandoned for being a daughter—the seventh daughter to be born in a row. *Paridegi* goes on a journey to the realm of death and returns to her place of origin to save her dying parents, and becomes a spirit that guides the dead to another realm. Kim Hyesoon’s feminist reading of this narrative is that *Paridegi*’s realm of death is not an oppressed space but a counter-patriarchal space where a woman can redefine herself. In this realm, “a woman is darkness, is empty, and she does not abide to the law of ownership.” According to Kim, *Paridegi*’s hell is a “black mirror.” And Kim Hyesoon’s hell extends from this black mirror, remaining counter-patriarchal, possessing nothing, reflecting and resisting “Mr. Military Officers with black ink.” Hence, “the darkness inside Seoul’s intestine is dense.” Forever empty, Kim’s stage platforms stack up and shatter with their weight of emptiness the controlled, militarized borders inside and outside of us. In Shohei Imamura’s *Black Rain* time never really moves beyond the time of the atom bomb explosion, because the image of the clock persists throughout the film. This is how we know the black rain is still falling inside the survivors. And this is why translation must continue to remind us of the hell

within and outside of the U.S. empire. Whether we are here in the U.S. or there in South Korea or in between, we can also find something outstandingly white in Kim's poetry: "White mother. White cough. White sigh. White breasts.... White snow is falling. Young white woman's white smile.... White sea. White needle. White snow fills up.... Hell of tenderness."

HLH: Kim's poems are populated by animals: rats especially, but also chickens, horses, foxes and others. You talk in your introduction about "surviving hell" as a point of commonality that allows rats to stand in as the poet's alter ego. There are other ways to depict hell (e.g., with angels and demons in another world, as, say, Milton does in *Paradise Lost*). Why is Kim's choice of animals instructive?

DMC: I think Kim Hyesoon's animals are instructive because they are given allegorical roles like the roles many animals have in Korean fables. According to many stories I heard as a child, a hundred-year-old fox can turn into a human, or in some cases a fox that devours one hundred humans (some aim for human livers) can transform into a woman. These fox-women often trick children and seduce men in order to consume them. Men often encounter them in the darkness of the night, during their travels away from the safety of their home village. The fox-women stand for evil women who are

not fit to be dutiful wives—the fear of falling into danger, violence and ingestion. In "Father Is Heavy, What Do I Do?" a woman poet plays the role of a fox and "devour[s] one hundred fathers / and become[s] a father." And "Father became a father because he'd killed father, his father's father." The margin consumes the center and becomes the center. Kim Hyesoon's rats feast on human babies, adorable white rabbits, and also one another and become rats again. In "Seoul's Dinner" Seoul, a non-animal, is given the functions of consumption and excretion: "Pigs enter. The pigs oink and suck on Seoul's lips.... Seoul, which is simultaneously a mouth and an anus." Everything in the landscape enters and exists in Seoul. Hence Seoul is always in the flux of becoming itself. I thought one of the most fantastic scenes in Shohei Imamura's *Pigs and Battleship* is when several thugs involved in raising pigs in Yokosuka, a G. I. town where U.S. naval ships are stationed, are eating a cooked pig. This pig had previously consumed the body of a man the thugs killed and disposed of at the pig farm. So when Imamura says he wanted to show the "power of pigs" in the film by releasing hundreds of pigs into the G. I. streets of Yokosuka, the pigs become powerful pigs, filling every alley, crushing everything in their way, and the thugs who have eaten the pigs are pigs, and the prostituted women who prepare pigs for their Japanese male customers and G. I.s and who eat pigs are also pigs. Yokosuka becomes a pig town. Both

Kim's and Imamura's animals instruct us how to subvert the order of power.

HLH: "Why Can't We" ends, "why do we go near [Buddha] and bow on our knees till they are raw and look once into his eyes then return home with our downcast faces?" Is there a form of attention that readers of the translations might seek in order to register the "two different realities" you note in your introduction—without merely returning home with downcast faces?

DMC: On August 11, 2009, I interpret for a woman at a shelter, downstairs from where I work. She came from South Korea four months ago. She stayed in Los Angeles for two months, and when she could no longer pay her \$350 rent, she took a bus up to Seattle and has been living on the street. She is not certain if she has ever been arrested. She remembers that she shouted something loud on the street in Los Angeles and was approached by a police officer. She is not certain if that means she was arrested. She is surrounded by people who are given orders to stalk her—by someone hiding in the darkness. Whenever she decides to do something, the people who follow orders prevent her from doing what she wants to do. They have no basic knowledge about being human. She feels they may be bad people, capable of doing something harmful. Her parents are deceased and her siblings have their own families and

lives. She has worked in factories. She is divorced. She would like to enroll at a school to study ESL. She would like to know if she can really start studying English on September 16. As a translator of Kim Hyesoon's poetry, I am preoccupied with home—my first home, South Korea—and things that are dislocated from home. I think of translation as a process of constant displacement, a set of linguistic signs displaced by another. And this displacement takes place under specific historical conditions, sometimes acting out the orders from the darkness. I like to think that my translation takes orders from Kim Hyesoon's hell that defies neocolonial orders. My hope is that the displaced poetic or narrative identity manages to persist in its dislocation, translating itself out of the orders of darkness alone or with assistance from the translator who must also translate herself. On August 13, 2009, I find her at the lunchroom of the shelter. Spaghetti and garlic bread. She is very troubled by the people who follow her. She told them they were worthless beings, yet they didn't react at all. She didn't understand how they could be so indifferent to such a remark. She repeated, "Worthless beings? Worthless beings?" When translation fails, that is when we take orders from the darkness—displaced identities easily become worthless beings.



Ferial Ghazoul on Muhammad Afifi Matar's *Quartet of Joy*

H. L. Hix: It would be hard for an American reader of *Quartet of Joy* not to think of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which some would describe as "difficult, ambiguous, hermetic," just like Matar, and which shares Matar's attention to the spiritual. But *Four Quartets* is, in relation to its cultural context, spiritually conservative and traditional. I take it that *Quartet of Joy* would *not* be regarded as either traditional or conservative in its cultural context. Are there particular spiritual questions raised by its difficulty and hermeticism, or would you describe the poem's questioning as more general?

Ferial Ghazoul: This is so not only for American readers but for any reader. There was a review in the Cairo-based *Al-Ahram Weekly* of *Quartet of Joy*, and the Egyptian reviewer's central point was the affinity between Matar's collection and T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Without denying such correspondence, we can also read *Quartet of Joy* as a counterpoint to T. S. Eliot's *Four*

Quartets. Unlike Eliot's reference to redemption in the Christian sense (what one might call Eliot's late style), Matar celebrates a rebirth and a revival through the elements. Matar's use of scripture is cultural rather than religious. After all, the Quran—besides being a divine revelation—is a sublime text from the literary point of view. Sufis have used words and phrases from the Quran to construct a discourse that is anti-orthodox. The mystic lining of Matar's poetry offers a radical and innovative practice. The very structure of *Quartet of Joy* is based on an Empedoclean universe made up of plurality (earth, fire, water, air), but that worldview that marked pre-Socratic thought is integrated in an Arab-Islamic poetic discourse.

HLH: At various points in the poem, Matar pays particular attention to the letters of the alphabet. The relation between poetry and calligraphy is much stronger in Arabic tradition; I wonder if there is a special sense that Matar's attention to letters has, that American readers might not normally be alert to.

FG: While in the West the image was used to articulate the divine message to the public, in the Arab-Islamic world the sacred word was disseminated through calligraphy. Arabic calligraphers developed principles based on geometry and aesthetics for the different scripts. Some of the chapters in the Quran open with

letters that stand by themselves. Ibn 'Arabi, the medieval Andalusian philosopher, mystic and poet, identified letters as "nations"; and among Sufis, the letter *alif* (the first letter in the Arabic alphabet) stands for God. Calligraphy tapped the artistic energy of Arab-Islamic people and came to represent visually and conceptually the artistic rendering of the Word.

HLH: I was especially struck by the moment at which Matar writes "It is passion in the Book / of the cosmos / and it is the *qasida* in the mud / of creation... / so listen." Is this a representative moment, in the sense that it exemplifies a complexity in Matar's view of things: disorder (passion) pervading order (the Book), and order (*qasida*) pervading disorder (mud)?

FG: Matar often refers to disorder/disassociation and order/harmony as two forces, sometimes intersecting and sometimes one within the other, so your reading makes sense. In this passionate dialogue between a woman and a man in "Air Joy," the female voice calls on her beloved to "invoke the wind and be silent." She is calling on his poetic power to make an appeal and then wait, "for the mercy of the clouds will descend / on no one save he who perfects silence / and waiting." She wants him to listen to the "birth" about to happen, and "birth" here stands for fulfillment in the personal, national and cosmic sense. It is precisely this silence that

will make him hear the passionate impulses becoming an orderly Book, and hear the very beginning of the *qasida*/poem as it is formed. In other words, what is formless becomes formed, taking the status of the sublime. But one needs to listen to those hushed voices of creation and beauty as they emerge and at the moment of their formation. This is looking forward to something that is taking shape. It is the promise not yet perceived except by those who are attentive. At least this is how I read this beautifully complex love poem.



Johannes Göransson on Aase Berg's *Remainland*

H. L. Hix: Would it be in the spirit of your concluding observation in the translator's note (that Berg "shows how every language may be foreign, even to its native speakers") to take as one example of such a made-foreign language the ending of "In Dovre Slate Mill"—when the speaker's "stiff hands cupped around the surface of your black cranium," a kind of translation of a gesture of love into a foreign language?

Johannes Göransson: What I mean in a very general sense is the way Berg amplifies certain features of the Swedish language (the brutal consonants, the awkward sentence structures, the neologisms, the violent and physical phrases) to a degree that makes me feel the way a foreigner might feel trying to learn Swedish. As I point out in the introduction, there are so many weird neologisms that I begin to read regular compound words (such as *spackhuggare*, killer whale) as strange neologisms (*spack* = blubber, *huggare* = biter, thus

"blubber biter" in my translation). Or the way her odd phrases make me see how strange regular idioms are. For example, in *Uppland* she uses the phrase "*halla sig i skinnen*," which means "calm down" (what you say to an unruly kid), but with strange variations of it calling attention to the literal meaning, "hold on to your skin" (she uses variations of this throughout).

HLH: Things seem overwhelmingly slimy and mushy and wet and warm until "Glass Deer," in which suddenly all is brittle and crystalline and cold. How do you (how might I) take that sudden change?

JG: *Remainland* is a selection of poetry spanning four books (Berg has since then published yet another). "Glass Deer" is, in addition, part of *Dark Matter*, a long book-length gothic/sci-fi work that cannibalizes a variety of source texts, ranging from Harry Martinsson's 1950s national sci-fi epic *Aniara* to the 1970s slasher movie *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Both the "overwhelmingly slimy and mushy" aspect and this cannibalism I think pertain to your question.

To begin with, I think of Berg's early work as having a kind of poetics of exhaustion. A lot of the source texts as well as the "action" (I wouldn't call it plot because, though things happen, there is not a strong sense of causality) has to do with images of the denaturalized

body, which are driven over the top into a state of exhaustion (or, to use Bataille, of expenditure). If there's an arc, then that's the arc: from excess to exhaustion. When the "dark matter" is exhausted what are left are perhaps more bony, clearer, line-based poems. In the Swedish these are also very sing-songy or lullaby-esque.

I should mention too that I think one text *Dark Matter* cannibalizes is Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus." Berg picks up on the way Plath uses excessive cinematic montage to bring about a state of exhaustion (where you can just imagine eating men like air). In *Dark Matter* there is an extensive imagining of getting the snail out of the shell (I rocked shut as a seashell) in order to "pull the plug" on the whole machinery. So *Death* is certainly one answer to your above question.

Another answer can be seen in *Remainland* in the move toward this kind of sing-songy lullaby-esque lyric in the next two books, *Forsla Fett* and *Uppland*. The "mushy" (or, as Berg calls it in a few interviews, "fat") poetry is replaced by a more aural, less imagistically based writing.

In the overall arc of her career, this change can be said to signify a number of changes. She got pregnant (thus had to change her lifestyle); she severed herself from

the politically radical Stockholm Surrealist Group, and a bunch of other stuff.

As in *Dark Matter*, *Remainland* uses various source texts—notably *Solaris* instead of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, string theory instead of biological and anatomical science. In addition, Berg purposely (mis-) translated string theory articles from English into Swedish, creating many of the very ambiguous, multi-vectorized repetends (strings/cords, vibrations etc). The book in many ways offers the fusion of abstract science and grotesque maternal body (the meaning of "strings," for example, is very ambiguous in this regard).

On the whole then this to me seems like a very deathly, exhausted book. That's in large part what makes it so beautiful. But it's also a poem about the maternal body and (unexpectedly perhaps) "love."

Uppland takes this lullaby mode in a different direction with its often infantile language (mixed with "cockviolence").

HLH: The "whisper" that states "Mustn't think we are something / Either heavier or lighter // We hang in the air / hover between life and death" recalls (for me) W. S. Merwin's "Men think they are better than grass," and the transition from a world view in which the earth is



held up by Atlas to one in which it is held in orbit by the force of gravity. Does it also exemplify the linguistic transition you describe in your translator's note, that Berg's "dynamic referentiality is more important than her actual reference"?

JG: There is a pun in this excerpt: "Mustn't think we are something" refers to a common put-down in Swedish society—to think one is "something" (or to think one is special). This insult doesn't exactly make sense in the U.S., where the insult we use is "loser" (i.e., the very opposite!). But the Merwin line does give it an interesting spin. I like your idea of "gravity," because the entire book takes place in up-land, the in-between space: not flying and not landing, not floating away and not firmly planted on the ground (which I guess would be the Atlas-based worldview).

As for the "referentiality" quote: yes, I think this is an example of her vibrant, vibrating use of language. It doesn't sever all ties with reference, but it doesn't believe in some kind of natural language either. I think it's also a change from the "exhaustion" of the earlier pieces, into a worldview that doesn't exhaust—it just hovers.

David Keplinger on Carsten René Nielsen's *The World Cut Out with Crooked Scissors*

H. L. Hix: Nielsen's poems bring to mind for me the English words "animal," "animation" and "animism," which share a root, and which in some way rhyme with or echo the coincidence of phylogenetic fact and ontogenetic metaphor (our evolutionary descent from apes) that is posted for question in "Darkness." What about our animality is "put...another way" in/by these poems?

David Keplinger: When Nielsen came to speak to my students at American University last spring, he was asked similar questions about our animality, and his response surprised them. He said he felt it was very interesting that we saw those coincidences and rhymes in his work, but what did he know, he "only wrote the thing." I suppose if we were to ascribe animality to his poems it would find its source in this intentional unintentionality. His poems (and I have worked with them so long they

now feel like mine) are very conscious about their movements. He works on them meticulously, but they achieve the unchoreographed, un-intention of birds suddenly turning simultaneously in the air.

HLH: “Carrier Pigeon” seems to suggest that transformations are multiple, various and perpetual. There’s a strong tradition in literature of metamorphosis as a theme and metaphor (with Ovid as the most obvious exemplar). How would you speak of Nielsen’s poetry in relation to that tradition?

DK: Nielsen’s poetry finds its roots in the French Symbolist tradition of Rimbaud and Baudelaire. It is a tradition in which metaphor is used to infuse the world with mystery—once the divine correspondences in nature are debunked by Darwin. Nielsen is a scientist, though. He sees transformations not in the mythic world but in the everyday world, as Darwin did. He sees a heart behaving like a dog, and an ape behaving like a man. His way of infusing the world with myth is to see the mythical in the ordinary, and to speak with the language of a neighbor observing someone’s underwear hanging on the line. The prose poem is his microscope slide. Everything oozes together in that space, turning into everything else.

HLH: “Horse” and “Marmot” seem to me especially vivid examples of an aspect of Nielsen’s poetry. In “Horse,” the girl perceives what others don’t perceive, and what indeed might not be the case. In “Marmot,” humans are present only by implication, and as an absence. Is this attention to what is ambiguously there and not there something you regard as peculiar to Nielsen’s poetry, or as more broadly characteristic of poetry?

DK: I agree with Mallarmé that meaning is found not in things themselves but in the ways that things relate when they are set side-by-side. He said the meaning comes in the interstice, in the gaps. Essentially, Nielsen’s poems are full of gaps. So each relationship carries multiplicities of meanings. Not random meanings, either. His intention is very clear—to surprise us with joy when we’d expect horror, and to horrify us when we are sitting satisfied and unsuspecting. He does this by creating an absence of something we inevitably imagine for ourselves—he trusts us to do the dirty work.



Peter H. Lee on *Echoing Song*

H. L. Hix: You note in your preface that the poets in *Echoing Song* question “the symbolic basis of women’s social oppression,” and construct a “modern female voice of resistance.” Having translated (or gathered translations of) the work from one *language* to another, do you see that resistance as translatable? In other words, are there aspects of these poets’ resistance to the *circumstances* of social oppression in Korea that apply to social oppression anywhere?

Peter H. Lee: A Korean woman poet’s “resistant voice” should be contextualized and decoded (“unriddled”). A typical poet is writing in the context of Korea’s past and present: 500 years of Confucian moral discourse whose aim was to contain, control, and silence women; Japanese colonization (1910–45), the Korean War (1950–53), corrupt or dictatorial governments (1948–92) and imperialism. In fact, Korean poets, both male and female, wrote their works under continuous censorship from 1910 to 1987.

There was almost no female discursive tradition in premodern Korea, as elsewhere. In my opinion, our poets are trying to invent a language adequate to express the multiplicity in feminine desire and experience that informs their artistic vision—a language that is able to present feminine subjectivity and sexuality as culturally variable. The language of suffering in East Asia and the West, for example, is male. Hence our poets delve into ancient shamanism with its phonocentric tradition, in which women control symbol-making in myths and religious imagery in the folk tradition. Their resistant voice, in varying degrees, is expected to have a disruptive function. They are trying to write a socially and culturally engaged poetry that is not continuous with the language of their oppressors.

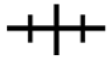
Similar works by feminists elsewhere (e.g., Native American, African American, Asian American and other minorities) are accessible with proper contextualization, because gender-based oppression and cultural-symbolic repression exist globally. The poem as poem seeks other poems of a similar kind for recognition and evaluation, but the educated reader is able to note the differences at the points of maximum resemblance. As Barbara Johnson said somewhere, the question of gender is a question of language.

HLH: I found the “Why I Write” notes especially compelling, and a very helpful and provocative aspect of the anthology. I found myself trying to apply each “Why I Write” statement more broadly than to the individual poet who wrote it. For example, when Kim Sûnghûi says her writing rejects “the world of ‘rightness’ and the world of ‘of course,’” I begin to see others of the poets also seeking to take nothing for granted. Are there ideals expressed by one of the poets that seem to you to extend also to the work of others of the poets?

PHL: Yes, for example, Mun Chônghûi’s preoccupation with “a live language,” and Kim Chôngnan’s battle cry, “To think with all of my body. To perceive a woman’s body, which is nature, teaches”—which echoes French feminists, especially Cixous’s notion of feminine writing, *écriture féminine*, in which one writes with one’s body.

HLH: One particular moment in the book to which I keep returning is Ko Chônghûi’s “A Study of Women’s History 6,” and its distinction between a man’s rule and a woman’s way. Is this a distinction that, though only explicit here, is implicit throughout the work in the book, and helps to explain the success you identify in your preface, the poets’ success in “constructing a female voice of resistance” without neglecting “women’s spousal and maternal role”? The resistance then is to a man’s rule, and the affirmation is of a woman’s way?

PHL: Yes, you are right. The late Ko Chônghûi, and Yi Yônju, Ch’oe Sûngja, Kim Sûnghûi, Kim Chôngnan and Kim Hyesun, in various ways, are strong feminist poets.



Alexis Levitin on Astrid Cabral's Cage

H. L. Hix: You note in your introduction that creatures from Cabral's childhood "have accompanied her faithfully through a lifetime of travel," and that she herself claims never to have renounced her animality. If Aristotle considers humans "rational animals," is it fair to view Cabral's poetry as depicting humans as "traveling animals"?

Alexis Levitin: Let me answer at a slight tangent. When asked years ago if she goes often to Manaus, Astrid replied: "I do not live in Manaus, but Manaus lives in me." In her dreams she often finds herself walking the streets of Manaus. As for travelling animals, her tangential reply is: "I travel and the animals of the Amazon travel with me."

HLH: Taking "Amphibian" as a hint, is it too reductive to see Cabral's poetry as amphibious, in the sense of operating equally well in nature (as represented by her

childhood experience) and culture (as represented by her urban adult life)?

AL: Your metaphoric speculation seems valid to me and to her (she is sitting beside me as I write). However, she is a pretty down-to-earth type person, and so she prefers to see the term "amphibian" in its earthly, literal sense of being at home on land and in the water. In fact, turns out that in a much earlier book called *Visgos da Terra* (*Viscosity of Earth*) she divided the text into three sections: Terra (Land), Agua (Water), Seres (Creatures). As for nature/culture, she says some of her books leave her childhood life in nature behind and focus on more abstract, universal things. She feels that her poetry presents two distinct lines: one turns toward the tangible, the concrete, the immediate, a world of places, animals, things; the other turns towards abstract thought, contemplation, speculation, etc. (Two whole books are full of ruminations over death, many of the poems provoked by the deaths of her husband and one of her sons). *Jauala*, of course, is a collection that clearly deals with both nature and culture. By the way, her translation of *Walden* suggests an interest in the amphibian forces in our lives: was Thoreau "really" in nature? Remember that even from his humble cabin, he would walk every afternoon over to Emerson's for dinner. He was, in fact, a highly cultured man, filled with

Greek and Latin, etc., while counting his beanstalks (haha).

HLH: Animals and plants in Cabral's poetry seem to tell us not only about themselves, but about ourselves. For example, the snake in "Life Among the Ruins" tells "of the nothingness surrounding man," and the chestnut trees and turtles in "Pity" prompt the speaker to ask "do they feel pity for me?" This leads me to regard Cabral's poetry as (whatever else it is also doing) at least implicitly articulating a vision of humanity. Are there other indices of her vision that I should also be alert to?

AL: Yes, when she speaks of animals she is thinking of us as well. In fact, she is against the artificial separation between the world of animals and humans. Very often in this book she is describing the real animals she has encountered literally, while at the same time using them as metaphors for other observations from human experience. For example, "Cave Cane" is a poem in which she is really talking about what is inside people, the animal side of ourselves. Throughout the book there is a strong metaphoric aspect in which things human are represented by animals. For example, death appears as a naked jaguar in one poem. In another, the mystery of death appears as the "Seven-Headed Beast." The "Two-Faced Dog" for her represents the ambiguity of life itself, which gives us the good and the

bad (which, by the way, is a common expression in Brazil for any difficult problem one is confronting). The poem called "Tamed Dragon" is of course about a childhood memory, but also about the entire magical world of childhood fantasy which one loses upon "growing up." "River Dolphin in the Body" is based on a familiarity with the real river dolphins of the Amazon (quite a sight, by the way, when their perfectly smooth, rounded back, utterly pink, suddenly appears curving through the muddy waters), but also clearly represents the universal force of sexuality in humans. The poem "The White Whale" is as much about the world of images in which the modern world has immersed us (the white whale is seen on a TV screen, hence the sofas at the end of the poem) as about the white whale itself. So in this poem the nature world ends up being a world of images, a part of human culture.



George Messo on İlhan Berk's *A Leaf About to Fall*

H. L. Hix: Berk's comment that the "difficult thing is to write easy, flawed poems" reminds me of Yeats's "Adam's Curse": "A line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught." The (apparent) ease in Berk's poems make them welcoming to the reader. Is there something about their flaws that lends them (some portion of) their weight?

George Messo: I chose a lot of the poems from Berk's *Deniz Eskisi*. If there's one book above all that I like, it's this one. It was written at a time when Berk had recently retired and moved to live in the coastal town of Bodrum. A lot of the book's "feel," it's "openness" (that casual tone) has to do with his own sense of liberation. From that moment he was writing more or less full-time. He once talked about how he'd wake early, set out through town on foot, walking by the harbor, up into the foothills, and then at the end of a long day

he'd settle down at his writing desk and set down all that he'd seen that day, the impressions, the sounds. So there is in these poems a strong sense of the "given," of what a poet can be *gifted*. He went out each morning looking for the poems he'd later write. They read, for me, like celebrations of these gifts.

If I can try to connect this to his use of "flaws": I think he's not so much talking about a stylistic or linguistic feature of the poems. It's more a creative stance in relation to the way a poem makes its claim on him. He wants (at least in these poems from *Deniz Eskisi*) to be pushed and nudged and lead away in all the directions the poem has a mind to go. He doesn't want to sit imperiously over the page and shape it to a template or a pre-recognized form. It's the simplicity, maybe the honesty of that approach that lends it weight.

HLH: Such lines as "Whichever angle we take, everything explains itself," and "We know the way" might be read as optimism or as fatalism. Which do you find more central to Berk's poetry, and what is its effect on the work?

GM: Berk talked repeatedly about "the hell of writing." But I'm not sure how seriously to take him. He loved to play the "Turkish Rimbaud," but there's little in his work to suggest that it was *there*, in the poems, that he

wrestled his demons. That “(apparent) ease” that you sense, and which I feel too in many of his poems, has a lot to do with Berk being at ease with himself as a writer. In his best poems he’s a celebrant—“crediting marvels,” as Heaney says, big and small. And in Bodrum, where he wrote most of these poems, he was practically falling over them. The poems poured out of him. He was immensely prolific, right to the end. He said that he always considered life a place for writing, not for living. He knew the way—*his* way. Poetry, he says repeatedly, gave him life, and he made a life from it.

HLH: The first poem (my favorite in the book) centers on something that doesn’t explain itself: the “she” is left wondering who it was who left the sprig of basil. Am I right to attribute as much importance to mystery (to the unknown and ineffable) in the poems as to the explained (or even the explainable)?

GM: I’m going to side-step this one, clumsily, by throwing in Paul Muldoon, who writes: “You have before you a person who...argues for the primacy of unknowing yet insists on almost total knowingness on the part of poet as first reader.”

Berk loathed the idea that his poetry could be “explained” or that a poem might itself be some form of “explanation.” Frequently, his strategies of (what he

called) *deforming*, of *deformation*, corrupt common meanings in ways that re-mythologize his subjects. *Şeyler Kitabı* (*Book of Things*) is, I suppose, a vision of the familiar worlds of the *inanimate* and *a priori*, radically de-familiarized. He’s waving, making signs, running home with his shoebox full of grass and stones and spiders, and from these common, simple things, he makes a poem. His appetite for engagement, for meetings and “friendships” (as he called them) with the world around him was boundless. Time and again the poems say, “Hey! Over here! Look at this!” These objects, these *things* were so profoundly mysterious to him and, yes, very much unknown in the wider sense, and yet intimately part of his life, so intimately and vitally part of his life that without them he could never write.



Wayne Miller on Moikom Zeqo's *I Don't Believe in Ghosts*

H. L. Hix: The title poem laments in its first stanza the absence of stability and law, and in its last stanza "the cancer of bureaucrats." Yet in between the two is the statement, "I believe in life, everything I love," which reminds me of Ivor Gurney's "I believe in the increasing of life." Is it generalizing too absurdly to view these poems as investigating the space opened for love by law?

Wayne Miller: I think Zeqo would be intrigued by the idea that the law opens up space for love, and would be inclined to agree. I think he'd be more comfortable with the clarification that the law, judiciously and humanistically applied, has the capacity for opening up space for love—and, more generally, space for personal, intellectual, and artistic pursuits and interests.

In the context of the time and political situation during which Zeqo was writing *I Don't Believe in Ghosts* (Albania

under the Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha), "the law" was utterly unpredictable, and its application had the potential to disrupt without warning an individual's personal and intellectual life. I think Zeqo's assertion implies that, in such a context, that which is called "the law" is, in fact, nothing like what we value as "the rule of law." Under "the rule of law," at least ideally, the law isn't fickle, politically motivated or unequally applied, but rather should possess an almost metaphysically grounded steadiness of application.

Thus, for Zeqo in 1970, asserting the value of "life [and] everything I love" (which I think means love broadly defined, including intellectual loves, such as literature) stands in opposition to the absence of stability and law. Love posits a real life-grounding value—one that contrasts starkly with Hoxha's bureaucratically maintained, anti-humanist, ultimately valueless caprice. As such, you could read Zeqo's poems as investigating the space opened for love by law, though I suspect Zeqo might like the inversion of that as well: the space in which the rule of humanistic law can be applied is opened by love (again, broadly defined).

HLH: Is it generalizing too absurdly to view such lines, from a more private/personal (rather than public) point of view, as exploring the space opened for love by secretlessness?

WM: I'm not sure that, in "Open," Zeqo is talking about the space opened for personal love by secretlessness—at least, I hadn't thought about the poem that way before. In my reading, Zeqo's highlighting his own artistic emphasis on the senses and the present, which he sees as grounding himself and his work. He's also contrasting his work's articulation of his personal, emotional life with the narrow, prescribed artistic agenda of socialist realism (and with the closed nature of Albanian life under the prying eyes of Hoxha's dictatorship). His standing before the world "open, / secretless" is sort of offering himself up—both to his art and, more ominously, to the political apparatus that could turn such an offering into a martyrdom.

But that's my reading. I'd be curious to see you make the case that he's also talking about the relationship between secretlessness and love. I don't think that idea is incompatible with Zeqo's worldview. It's just not my reading of the poem.

HLH: Such poems as "The Moon Sings" and "Signature" seem to me to insist that the domain of poetry is unbounded, and its origins cosmic, even metaphysical. What implications of such a view for an Albanian poet in Zeqo's circumstances at the times during which those

poems were written can be generalized to poets in other circumstances as well?

WM: Zeqo definitely sees poetry as unconstrained and rooted in the cosmic. Zeqo was deeply inspired by the Romantics (especially Shelley), and I think Zeqo sees the poet's role at least partially in transcendent, metaphysical terms. This fact, though, was complicated by the place and time in which Zeqo wrote, because to see poetry in such a way could be viewed as diverging from socialist realism and, perhaps worse, as finding value elsewhere than in "the system"—and thus was inherently a political act.

Further, I think both "The Moon Sings" and "Signature" (as well as other poems, such as "An Explication of the Word Loneliness") respond to Albania's isolation. It's hard for American poets to imagine Zeqo's position writing in Albania in the early 1970s, when Albania had severed regular ties with every country in the world except China (and would soon disconnect from China, too). Remember that the country of Albania has about the same population as the Seattle metropolitan area. If Zeqo had almost no chance of finding an audience outside of Albania's borders, and if his work was likely to be suppressed within Albania, then for whom was Zeqo writing? With whom was his work in conversation? His answer seems to be the natural world—and perhaps



a kind of mystical notion that, even if his work never were to find its way out of Albania, it somehow still would commune with literature, across the vast distance between Albanian writers and everyone else.

What can be generalized from this? Well, there is a kind of optimism in the fact that Zeqo wrote these poems potentially with no broad audience in mind, and now they're published in the U.S. and elsewhere (and Albania's political situation is better, if far from ideal). And I think there's something to the belief that one's words are always in contact with the larger cosmos of literature—even if such a communion only occurs in the poet's mind. I can see how that idea (the idea that, in a country as isolated as 1970s Albania, Zeqo was never actually alone in his work or his thinking) was legitimately sustaining through some very dark years.

Jennifer Moxley on Jacqueline Risset's *Sleep's Powers*

H. L. Hix: From the very beginning, Risset describes sleep as "ever elusive." In other existential/spiritual matters, we often ascribe elusiveness not to a practice or experience itself, but to its object: e.g., not poetry itself is elusive, but its meaning; not worship, but deity. In learning about sleep from Risset, is there, in your view, also something(s) we learn about such other matters?

Jennifer Moxley: I think the important difference between sleep and your examples above (poetry, the deity) lies in an aspect of it central to Risset's exploration: sleep is not outside of us. Sleep is quotidian and, perhaps, banal. Risset is interested in how this somatic necessity undermines order, reason, societal control, self-possession, self-knowledge and so on. Her inquiry is reliant on the uniqueness of the phenomenon of sleep. And yet sleep and poetry have often been equated (Keats, the Surrealists, etc.). Perhaps sleep is not elusive in the way the meaning of a poem is elusive: after all,

we can *read* a poem; it is a material object, fixed in its choice of words if not in its fullness of message. A good poem may yield many interpretations, but its secrets will out more readily than those of the unconscious mind (sleep's playground). The poem once made is outside of us. Not so the unwritten work, the potential poem, the creative spark. Perhaps a search for analogies to sleep might end here, at creativity itself (as Valéry describes it in "Poetry and Abstract Art"), insofar as it is something that is *in* us, but that we cannot readily control.

HLH: Though its area of concern is similar to the first question, I *think* I'm not simply repeating the same question over again. When Risset recommends that sleep "be rendered in sentences which imitate its quasi-imperceptible movement," is the (linguistic and literary) sympathetic magic on which the value of this recommendation would depend something that can be extended to other quasi-imperceptible objects of inquiry?

JM: There's a fissure here. Risset is talking about representation, not inquiry. In other words, I feel that your question suggests that certain poetic rhythms might serve to conjure up the ineffable (unless I mistake your meaning, which is entirely possible). Of course, poetry, magic and spells are deeply connected. Once you begin to count beats and lines (whether Dante's Trinitarian

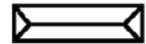
terza rima, or the pentagram evoked in pentameter, as Duncan has observed), you participate in a history of conjuring (whether consciously or not—and whether or not one *believes* repetitions can awaken the unseen, poetry's magic, in large part, lives in rhythm). There is a connection to Risset insofar as the sleep sentences she describes are trying to imitate sleep's rhythm, to *represent* sleep, but also, perhaps, to put readers into a sleep-like state (while keeping them awake). A poetic gesture?

As for other "quasi-imperceptible" objects of inquiry, I think I'd need a specific example to say anything more. Though if you are asking whether or not poetry (and art) can discover a form so analogous to a metaphysical phenomenon as to literally *connect* the human to that phenomenon—then I would say that, to my mind, the best attempts to answer such a question have been made by Mallarmé in "*Le Mystère dans les lettres*," Kandinsky in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Yeats in *A Vision* and even, in a way, by Spicer in his Vancouver lectures.

HLH: I am especially intrigued by the chapter on Time, but I have not decided how to read it. When Risset says sleep *suggests* "a substratum of time beneath the time that devours and changes all things," do you yourself take her to mean that sleep creates such a substratum,

is the vehicle that offers us such a substratum, conceives of such a substratum though it does not exist in fact—or some other possibility?

JM: Hmm. I think the reason why Risset uses words like “suggest” (*suggérer*) and “approaching” (*approcher*) is because her subject cannot be pinned down so far as to write, for example, “I know that sleep, without a doubt, does this.” So she picks words that allow her to say exactly what she means, and which leave open the possibility of various readings. In the opening chapter she says we pass over a threshold into sleep, but she does not list a definite “place.” Again, sleep as the ever-elusive. For me, the charm, and indeed the intellectual integrity of her inquiry into sleep, lies in part in the fact that she refuses to settle on any one definition of sleep. She allows the exploration and the knowing to coexist.



Idra Novey and Paulo Henriques Britto on Britto's *The Clean Shirt of It*

H. L. Hix: I don't mean to generalize too much from a particular observation, but I was struck by your comment in the introduction that Britto draws “on an understanding of his local community made more complex by knowledge of the world beyond it,” and I wonder if you share my inclination to extend that ideal—to see, as one important purpose of poetry in our “global village,” the introduction (by finding and/or making) of resonance into the dissonance between local and global?

Idra Novey: To find resonance in dissonance is a beautiful way of describing what a poem can do, and that's certainly what appealed to me in Britto's work. When I met him for dinner the first time, I was amazed at the breadth of his knowledge about other countries, and the fun he had connecting those other realities to Brazil. In a span of three minutes, he connected the history of a building in Rio de Janeiro to something

happening with a building in China to a scene in a novel by V. S. Naipaul he'd translated the year before—all while driving us through Friday night traffic in Rio. It was a fantastic ride, and a bit like the experience of translating his poems.

Paulo Henriques Britto: Because poetry is heavily language-bound, it may not be quite the best means for bridging the local and the global. I'd say music is probably a better choice. Poetry, at its best, is, I think, an exploration of language, which always means one particular language. But then, of course, translation is always possible (I'm a translator of poetry myself), and a good enough translation of a good poem can capture enough of it to make it worth reading in a different language.

HLH: "Fable Without a Moral" strikes me as particularly important to the collection. Probably this is more subjective than objective (I'm probably attributing importance to it partly because I like it a lot), but I am curious whether you see it also as somehow paradigmatic of Britto's work. Could one read others of his poems as fables without morals?

IN: Oh sure. I think a lot of Britto's poems could be described as fables without morals. His poems are mostly urban and ironic, but he also has a fascination

with history and what happens over and over, which gives his work an old feel—of the weird, suspended world of fables.

PHB: Yes, I agree with you. Indeed, this might be a good definition of literature in general, since Baudelaire and Flaubert at least: a fable without a moral. We no longer look to literature for answers of any kind, moral or otherwise, but rather think of it (to the extent that we think of literature as content at all) as a source of questions, questions that are worth asking. Think of Henry James's earliest fiction and his late novels: there you have the passage from the old Victorian (though it's actually at least as old as Horace) idea of literature as providing delight and instruction (mostly moral), to our present disenchanted outlook.

HLH: A similar question. When Britto says "The world remains opaque, / immune to consciousness and its flickers / of logic," this seems like an anti-moral that doesn't validate our constructing the fables we call poems, exactly, but contributes to explaining why we construct them. His poems seem guided by flickers of logic, but he doesn't allow himself (or the poem or us) the delusion that those flickers reveal "the truth." Is that too egregiously bad a way of looking at his work?



IN: That sounds like a good reading to me, but I'm going to forward the question to Britto to see what he might add.

PHB: Well, I'd say one of my constant themes (it's almost a running gag, only it isn't particularly funny) is the idea that it's absolutely imperative that you should make an earnest attempt to make sense out of everything, though all the time you're perfectly aware that (1) it's impossible to make sense out of everything, and (2) even if you do make sense out of some things, the sense is not in the things but in your own mind, so this probably tells you more about yourself than about the things. The old essentializing view of truth has proved unacceptable, but the idea that truth is just a dumb logocentric fiction is equally unpalatable. So you sort of swing back and forth, or rather move in circles, as a comedian in some insane silent-movie routine, and maybe you don't really go anywhere, but it sure beats sulking in a corner or taking such drastic steps as committing suicide, joining your local church or writing Language poetry.

Ravi Shankar on *Language for a New Century*

H. L. Hix: In your introduction to the Slips and Atmospherics section of the anthology, you note that the poems "are about multiplicity and escape." I assume that you are *not* suggesting that they are escapist, but how would you characterize the difference (between work about escape and escapist work)?

Ravi Shankar: That section of *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from Asia, the Middle East and Beyond* is one of my favorite sections because it encompasses the work of Asian and Middle Eastern writers (including those from the diaspora) who are pushing against the boundaries of form and received meanings. The assumption that certain language and conceptual experiments are the exclusive purview of Western writers who've taken classes on post-structuralism and deconstruction is proved spectacularly false by poets like Rukmini Bhaya Nair (who integrates the graphemic style of Sanskrit into English-language

poetry), Yang Lian (who appropriates characters from the two-thousand-year-old Seal script and combines these with characters that he has invented), and Filipino modernist giant José García Villa (who punctuates his poem with commas the same way a pointillist painter would use dots of color on the canvas).

I characterize their work as work that is “about escape,” because they circumvent the expected forms of meaning-making that have been passed on (in whatever linguistic tradition they come from) for generations. Syntax can become a kind of prison, as can narrative structure, syllable count and lineation into stanza. What I mean by “escape” is that these poets are assembling a system of meaning from the ground up, and that they are proving the truth of Gertrude Stein when she writes, “I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this same time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense. I made innumerable efforts to make words write without sense and found it impossible.” The tenuous, paratactic and lyrical sense that these poems provide is an escape from transparent confession, from contrived formalism and from codified expressions of love, grief and longing.

Something that is “escapist,” on the other hand, would look out at the world through sepia-tinted shades, amplifying certain elements while repressing others. A poem that doesn’t take seriously Keats’ notion of “negative capability,” of suspending our rational need for a totalizing answer in favor of abiding in the ambiguous and the contradictory, could be escapist. A poem where the narrative voice is so secure in itself that it never questions its presumptions could be escapist. A rhyming bit of occasional verse that allows its sonic imperatives to override its ontological purpose could be escapist. A rhapsodic pastoral poem that ignores the impact of man and machine, pollution and perception, on the natural world could be escapist. A poem that’s all glinting surface, linguistic wit and nonsensical collision, one that is uninterested in communication or in exploring the complexity of a mind in the world, could be escapist. And all of these I counterpoise to the idea of escape as aesthetic strategy.

HLH: In introducing the Earth of Drowned Gods section, you contrast the “enormous machines” that construct the “suffocating matrix of political ideologies” with the individual lives of “those who live under” and are affected by those machinations. What is the relationship between poetry’s role in documenting/recording those large-scale machinations, and its role in enabling us, at a smaller scale, to endure and contest the machinations?

RS: One of the great virtues and most often cited grievances with poetry is that it doesn't earn any money, that it is steadfastly outside of the closed circuit of commerce that other art forms (even peripherally) engage with. A friend of mine was recently lamenting that you "can't even give a poetry book away." What that says about the nature of our current literate readership, and the impact of the culture of narcissism on even those least predisposed to be affected by it, is fodder for another meditation. But I will aver that because a poem stands outside of most institutions of accretion and material wealth, it is *free* to comment on anything that deserves comment, to satirize anything that deserves satire and to break the taboos that other genres might feel compelled to uphold. Therefore I think of poetry as perfect in contesting the machinations of institutions—because it is literally beneath the gaze of those in power.

There's a famous quote from one of Auden's poems that "poetry makes nothing happen." This line is often quoted without its proper context, so I'd like to provide it here:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to temper, flows on south

From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

This excerpt speaks to me about the *power* of poetry in evading the gaze of executives (assuming that the poetry version of *Jersey Shore* is not forthcoming, and that there won't soon be a reality-TV show following a poet drum-beating trochaic stresses against his jeans while his inebriated Language poet housemate throws darts at a wall-hanging covered with words). Sometimes the smallest voice, like Anne Frank in her diary, can provide the greatest testimony to the nature of reality at any given time or place. I think of the immense courage of Bei Dao and others bicycling to the Democracy Wall after the Cultural Revolution—to post poems there that would buoy the spirit of millions. Or the poetry written by children in the concentration camps of World War II, like this excerpt from a poem written by Michael Flack in Terezin in 1944: "If in barbed wire, things can bloom / why couldn't I? I will not die!" If that doesn't speak truth to power, I don't know what does.

To quote British poet Angela Leighton writing on Auden's oft-quoted phrase; it "turns, by a tiny inflection, a redistribution of its stresses, into its opposite: 'poetry makes nothing HAPPEN.' By this accentual difference, 'nothing' shades into a subject, and happens. This is an

event, and its 'happening' sums up the ways of poetry. Intransitive and tautological, nothing is neither a thing, nor no thing, but a continuous event." Or in the hands of Wallace Stevens, "nothing" is what the listener in the snow beholds, the invisible and sheer fact of his or her existence, or what Buddhists call "*Śūnyatā*," the emptiness that leads to the cultivation of insight. What a poem does, being so miniscule that it enters our body as heart-song, is to imperceptibly transform us into a greater awareness of the world around us. A sharpening of the senses, a temporary lifting of the veil of discursive perception that freezes the ever-moving world into permanent edifice, and a revelation of the inwardness of another being—these are just some of the ways in which poetry can help us endure the hyper-accelerated world of information and capital in which we daily drown. In spite of all of this, we (the irreducibly divine part of ourselves) survive as a way of happening, a mouth, and therefore it's incumbent upon us to provide witness.

HLH: The penultimate paragraph of your introduction to the *This House, My Bones* section notes one thing we receive from "being presented with many versions of place and origin," namely illumination of "our shared humanity." I hear, though, a suggestion that we not only receive something, but are *obligated* to something, namely generativity (a word I take from the first sentence

of the paragraph). Am I right about that obligation, and if so would you be willing to speak to it further?

RS: Yes absolutely. I think that a serious engagement with art comes with a concomitant obligation towards transformation, whether on the perceptual, ethical, spiritual or linguistic level. Unless it's on the news, how often do we think about those suffering in Africa or suppressed by a dictator in Asia? In fact, isn't it easier to think about the world in shorthand, in stereotype that allows us to make broad generalizations without having to engage with the problematic aspect of another's consciousness (which carries with it a claim for as much happiness and comfort as we ourselves, mainly through no choice of our own, might possess)? So poetry can be a force that forces us to engage with the reality of someone else living on the other side of the globe from us. And I believe this engagement is not passive but active—that when we truly inhabit the mind and the potential deprivation of someone we don't know, we are required to act in some way, whether that's to write a poem or to donate to a charitable organization. That's what I consider the generative imperative of poetry, such that the art doesn't become an onanistic and closed exercise, but one that opens up into the larger world.

One of the primary reasons we put together *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from Asia, the Middle East and Beyond* was to react to 9/11, which devastated all three editors enormously. And yet, in what followed (the depiction of the East as intolerant and violent, the conflation of those from India with those from Pakistan with those from Afghanistan with those from Iraq, the caricature of individuals as terrorists or gurus, and the fear-mongering and virulent xenophobia propagated and capitalized upon by politicians with their own agendas), we felt compelled to react in some way, to show that we shared more in common than we differed from each other, that the principles of love, safety, community and interdependence were as pertinent for Kurds as they were for Americans. We hope that those who engage with this anthology will come to realize that there is no East (in fact, what we call the Far East is the Near North for the Australians) with a capital "E." That there are as many different beliefs and personalities abroad as there are at home. And our hope is that with this revelation comes the imperative to speak out, to change the dialogue of "us versus them," to begin to try to understand other cultures, even the reasons why they might loathe us—rather than to stay closeted in fear. And this imperative *is* generative. It asks us not to take our own independence for granted any more, but to reach out empathetically (through space) with the recognition that we (this human experiment)

are bound up together, much closer than we might ever have imagined before.



Carolyne Wright on Taslima Nasrin's *The Game in Reverse*

H. L. Hix: The teaching half of Horace's assertion that poetry should delight and teach seems to make us nervous these days. But Nasrin's poetry seems not timid about that didactic aspect of poetry, and a poem such as "Story" appears to me like a parable with a "moral." The morals I hear recurring in the poems, especially about gender and about religion, are not new, exactly, or unique to Nasrin. They're just lessons we can't seem to get through our thick skulls! Why is it important to hear them from her, in this poetry?

Carolyne Wright: I think it is important to hear these lessons from women from all over the world, because women's experiences (though they differ in details depending on the culture, the level of economic development, the climate and other factors) tend to be universal. Women share more in terms of their experience than they differ. Nasrin's poetry provides one of these voices, and it has the virtue of being

very clear-cut, vivid in its imagery, stark in its dramatic presentation, and not overly burdened with the sorts of literary subtleties (historical and cultural allusions, echoes of earlier literary works in Bengali, word-play) that are hard to translate or appreciate by those not familiar with Bengali culture and language.

And because she became an internationally known figure in 1994, as a human-rights *cause célèbre* and lightning rod for the growing Islamic fundamentalist movement in South Asia, Nasrin's personal story interested journalists and publishers, and enabled the publication of a book in my translation of her poems in English. At that point, my translations were the only examples of her work available in English. In fact, I had originally translated about 20 of her poems (the same number as I did for most of the poets I worked with in Bangladesh and earlier in West Bengal). But once Taslima Nasrin's story was on the front pages of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, publishers who had passed on her work before (*The New Yorker* and the like) began to approach me, asking if I had a book manuscript!

Nasrin first became known (and controversial) among Bangladeshi intellectuals in the late 1980s for her poetry's blunt language, angry and provocative tone, sexual themes and advocacy of sexual freedom for

women. These were demands seldom expressed openly in Muslim Bengali society, where most women outside of the privileged middle and upper classes are illiterate, married in their early teens, and treated as second-class citizens in comparison with men.

Middle- and upper-middle-class women, whose relative affluence tends to shield them from the most overt and brutal forms of male oppression, usually express their dissatisfactions (at least in written form) indirectly, with irony, wit or fiction—in the voices and experiences of characters not themselves. Or, when they do write more directly about women's struggles (as journalists, scholars, social scientists, politicians, social activists and literary writers), they tend to be less aggressive and confrontational than Nasrin. They tend not to attack verbally, but to pour their energies into more "constructive" responses: not only criticizing the ills of society as these negatively affect women, but proposing and working toward solutions, both in their writings and in their professional and volunteer activities with the many social-service and non-governmental organizations working toward the betterment of women, children, the environment and every other aspect of Bangladeshi life.

Ironically, one reason that a writer like Nasrin could emerge and flourish in Bangladesh is that she received

a good education with the full support of her father, to whom she was devoted, and who was determined that she follow him in a medical career. Though she is female, she had opportunities, in the hierarchical society of Bangladesh, available almost exclusively to those from a privileged background—and she had access and family support both moral and economic. Once she completed her medical education, in a country with a relative scarcity of doctors, Nasrin could choose to practice in the big city, Dhaka, the political and literary capital of the country. Thus she had access to literary and publishing networks, media outlets and a much freer lifestyle as a professional woman than she could have enjoyed in smaller cities and rural areas.

Part of Nasrin's notoriety in her own society came from a series of brief and turbulent marriages. Her first husband was one of Bangladesh's well-regarded younger poets, but the couple parted ways after a few years. Nasrin alludes in a number of poems to the difficulties and upheavals in this marriage, but this poet-husband did encourage her poetic interests—her first poems appeared in magazines and her first books were published during this period.

Her first books of poetry were essentially self-published (as are most books by young poets and writers in Bangladesh), with the author paying a printer, and then

distributing and selling the copies through bookstores and on her own. Beginning in 1990, after Nasrin had attained greater prominence for her columns and fiction (the same ironies that hold in publishing in the West!), she began to work with a professional publisher, who reissued the earlier volumes and published new collections.

In 1989, with the encouragement of her second husband (a Dhaka journalist and editor), Nasrin began to write columns for the news magazine he edited, *Khabarer k~gaj* (*News Paper*). These columns commented on social and gender issues in Bangladeshi society, especially institutionalized prejudice, negative stereotyping, and sexual oppression of women, specifically *purdah* (female seclusion), prostitution and domestic violence. Later, her columns were published in other Dhaka magazines, which resumed publication after the country's first democratic elections in February 1991. In all of these columns, Nasrin's anger at the injustices women face in Bangladeshi society burns through. Her graphic testimonies about her work as a physician in gynecology wards are among her most powerful: women screaming when they learn their new baby is a girl, terrified that their husbands will divorce them; women harassed or even attacked by strange men when they step outside their houses; professional women unable to rent a room or live on their own if they

must work in a city where they have no relatives with whom they can stay. It was columns recounting such experiences which first gave Nasrin a wider readership and following. With these columns as well as her poetry, Nasrin gradually became a household name among Bangladeshi intellectuals, with many admirers and critics.

Her prose style was blunt and confrontational by Bangladeshi standards, with a tendency to view issues from the most stark and one-dimensional perspective. As she has said in interviews with Indian journalists, this writing was meant to be provocative, to shock readers (especially hard-line Islamic leaders) into paying attention. In one column, she asserted that Muslim women should be permitted four husbands, just as Muslim men may take four wives. In another column, she stated that men who rape women should themselves be raped as punishment. Political liberals and intellectuals applauded the courage of Nasrin's outspokenness. But some women's-rights activists who worked with development organizations out in the villages feared that Nasrin's confrontational style could lead to a conservative backlash against the slow yet substantial gains in literacy and vocational training, economic independence, health care and family planning that poor Bangladeshi women had made in the last few decades. Many Bangladeshis also deplored what

they perceived as a tendency toward sensationalism, a disregard for journalistic accuracy, and occasional verbal swipes at her own supporters! But Nasrin was not a school of journalism degree-holder inculcated with the often-restrictive dictates of objectivity, balance and confidentiality of sources.

I tend to look at Nasrin's prose, especially these op-ed essays (a few dozen of which I have also translated) as an extension of her poetry—the same messages rendered in both genres. Both forms at their best are very effective. In "Story," in one representative dramatic situation, the speaker in the poem traces the "poor-me" storytelling of manipulative con men exploiting women's tendency to empathize and desire to be helpful and supportive. After the "boy" has told his sad story and gotten sympathy, good food, a warm bed and his sympathetic listener to share it with (this implied obliquely in the imagery of "drenching" in the river in moonlight), he moves on without any thanks to his next con, the girl next door. This guy doesn't even try to cover his tracks by targeting a girl a few blocks away. He doesn't seem to care that his previous con will be able to see him in action. Of course, this is a representative situation, not a re-creation of some particular incident in Nasrin's life, but it is certainly universal. Women anywhere can recognize this character type and their own experience of being used by exploitative men. And

often, unfortunately, used with their own consent and awareness on some level that they are being exploited.

However, what would make this poem scandalous in Bangladesh is not the man's serial exploitation of women, but the one element in the poem that is treated obliquely, in indirect euphemistic imagery—the swimming and "drenching" in the river, and the fact that the woman speaker takes the initiative to invite the man to this frolic! Such "shameless" forwardness by a woman would be the target of outrage for reactionary conservative Bangladeshi men, and the target of randy imaginings of adolescent Bangladeshi boys, who apparently liked to skim through these poems for the "dirty bits." How ironic, many of my Bangladeshi informants used to observe, that this poetry could serve to promote not so much greater freedom for women, but more of the same old objectification of women in the sexual fantasies of adolescent boys!

HLH: "Noorjahan" reminds me of the story from the gospel of John about the woman taken in adultery, but with twists: the woman herself is the main character, not the male teacher who happens to be passing by; the focus is on her experience, not on the accusation made against her. In the context of Nasrin's poetry, I hear both a reflection of the moral teaching of the gospel narrative, and a meta-reflection on the continued practice by the

religious of that against which religions advise, and so on. How does the echo of Nasrin's own life experience speak to us through such a poem?

CW: The poem "Noorjahan" is based, as the notes in the back of the book attest, on an actual case of a young woman being punished, supposedly for adultery, by the local *mullahs* of her district and committing suicide afterwards. I suspect that there was more nuance to the story than the media reported and than Nasrin recreated in the poem—complexities that we will never know. But it was a case that was sufficiently brutal and exceptional to receive coverage in the Bangladesh press, and Nasrin responded with her own outrage in this poem. Several of the women poets I translated, in both West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh, wrote poems in response to other vivid and graphic stories of abuse against women. I translated several of these. These poets (some of whom are journalists who regularly report on such incidents in the course of their professional lives) express their outrage at the brutality visited upon these women, and call for justice in powerful poems of their own. They deplore the self-serving hypocrisy of the so-called guardians of morality (in Bangladesh the right-wing Islamic clerics are the villains) who commit violence prohibited by their own religion's teachings in the name of protecting and honoring that religion!

But in this poem, Nasrin does something rather different: she claims her own victimhood in the victimization of this woman. Is this "me-too-ism," an egocentric attempt to deflect sympathy from the obvious victim, Noorjahan, and draw the attention to the author herself as sympathetic, but opportunistic, witness? Some of Nasrin's critics in Bangladesh had this view. Or is the speaker in this poem demanding something much more rigorous of herself: that she feel the blows in her own body, in the same sense that Jesus states that whatsoever his disciples do unto the least of these his brethren (the poor, the downtrodden of the earth), they do unto him? And Nasrin asks us, her readers, in the final lines of two stanzas of the poem, to examine ourselves—do we also feel these blows in our own bodies? Are we, thus, capable of blunt, direct, physical empathy with this suffering woman, the least of our sisters? It is this sort of that makes Nasrin's sometimes overly didactic poems fresh and surprising—they present new ways to consider old circumstances.



Linda Stern Zisquit on Yona Wallach's *Let the Words: Selected Poems*

H. L. Hix: I hear "House Said the House" as simultaneously affirming the importance of, and contesting the transparency of, the Biblical narrative of Adam naming the animals. Would that be one way (among many others) to view Wallach's larger poetic project?

Linda Stern Zisquit: As a secular Israeli who grew up in Israel, Yona Wallach knew the Biblical texts which are taught in Hebrew in every school from grade one. In this poem she may be reentering that Biblical narrative about Adam naming the animals. I was always moved by the childlike voice that is encountering these things as if for the first time—which is of course Adam's situation, as the first one to do so. And yes, as a project, she was coining a new language, using the ancient gender-conscious Hebrew in new ways, freeing it from some of its linguistic restrictions by "cross-dressing" and exchanging sexes.

HLH: You mention in your introduction that Wallach "combines holiness and shocking sexuality." How important is the qualifier "shocking"? In other words, is it primarily the shockingness of the sexuality, rather than the sexuality per se, that contributes to the qualities of her work that you note, such as its daringness and its transcendence?

LSZ: In terms of the language (Hebrew) and the context (Israeli traditional society and culture), Wallach's work was shocking. She broke the taboos built around separation of men and women both linguistically and traditionally. In Hebrew you always know who is speaking, but in Wallach's work there are surprises: the male becomes female; the boundaries are dissolved. Her experiments with language were groundbreaking and controversial—not only because of the sexuality she demonstrates, but also because of her sense of freedom to explore sexual relationships.

HLH: Am I stretching things too far to see "Colors Going Out" as another clue to the aims and qualities of her poetry, which seems often to distinguish between (to separate) essences and accidents, substances and attributes?

LSZ: Personally I see this as a poem about the end of Wallach's life, when her keen awareness of colors, objects, forms was changing because of her body's ailing and her imminent death. Earlier, she had been mesmerized by language with an almost manic quality, a swirl of words, and here she is coming towards a point of stillness—to get to the source, not to be swayed anymore by appearances. She is trying to find something beneath the surface of material objects, which (in a personal way) must have something to do with her approaching death. It is one of a group of poems written at the end of her life at age 41, as she was dying from breast cancer, and which was published posthumously.

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AUTHOR BIOS

H. L. HIX



H. L. Hix recently collaborated with Jüri Talvet to translate a collection of the poems of the Estonian peasant poet Juhan Liiv, entitled *Snow Drifts, I Sing*. His own "selected poems" is *First Fire, Then Birds*.



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