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On the cover: "Corno Di Bassetto." Graphite pencil drawing of George Bernard Shaw by David F. Routon (1931–2020). Used by permission of the artist.

A classical music enthusiast with a ready wit, Routon enjoyed Shaw's music criticism. Routon is known to have quoted Di Bassetto: "If you can say a thing with one stroke unanswerably you have style; if not, you are at best a marchand de plaisir; a decorative littérateur, or a musical confectioner, or a painter of fans with cupids and cocottes." Routon took particular delight in this: "The term 'ass' I take to be a compliment. Modesty, hard work, contentment with plain fare, development of ear, underestimation by the public: all these are the lot of the ass and the last of the Bassettos."

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# MIDDLE WEST REVIEW



MIDDLE  
WEST  
REVIEW

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*The Middle West Review* is an interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed journal focused on studying the American Midwest, a “lost region” which has received far less scholarly attention than other American regions. The journal is the only scholarly print publication dedicated to the study of the Midwest as a region. It provides a forum for scholars and non-scholars alike to explore the meaning of Midwestern identity, history, geography, society, culture, and politics.

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## Introduction to A Special Section on Translation

Happy New Year, All.

As a general rule, I don't make New Year's resolutions. That goes double during a global pandemic. Triple as we enter year three of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Omicron variant rages all over the planet. I'm all for self-improvement and taking stock, but I don't need another deadline or reminder of unfinished projects. That said, this year I was reminded of an article Sarah Kendzior wrote in 2016 for *The Correspondent* titled: "We're heading into dark times. This is how to be your own light in the Age of Trump" (Kendzior). In this article, Kendzior urges us to make a list of our values and our boundaries, to document the present and what we hope for in the future. Things were about to get bad, she warned, and one way to combat what was to be thrown at us was to hold on to the things we believe in, to ensure we don't sacrifice our values as things unravel. Kendzior was right. Really right. This year, as we headed into yet another year of a global pandemic and yet another year of global instability, I didn't make any resolutions. I did, however, take a look at the list I made before "pandemic" was a household term, before I knew how to sew masks, and before I became the chief administrator of a registered home-school while working full time.

The list I made is not particularly extensive, and I am privileged in many ways to have avoided the worst of the pandemic and its associated fallout (I live in the US, so vaccines are available and accessible). My list, though, is telling. I include ways to ensure that the memory of events is not eroded, and one of those ways is through the arts. While I did not begin the COVID-19 pandemic with the intention of co-translating an award-winning book into English, in retrospect, it makes sense. I had read *Mingas de la Palabra* with great admiration, so translating this book for English-speaking readers was a way to hold tight to the values I had said I would uphold. Miguel Rocha Vivas's book is an excellent, expansive study of oral and literary texts—what he terms "oralitures"—and is an important contribution to conversations on Indigenous literatures in Abya Yala, the Guna term for the so-called Américas. Bringing *Word Mingas: Oralitegraphies and Mirrored Visions on Oralitures and Indigenous*

*Contemporary Literatures* to an English-speaking audience was needed and important (Rocha Vivas).

I'm delighted and honored to introduce this special section of the *North Dakota Quarterly*, and I am particularly excited to see these works published and translated for the *NDQ* readership. One of the things that translation has always accomplished is a laying bare of epistemologies as epistemologies, thereby underscoring that there are many ways of knowing and understanding. This seems particularly acute during a global pandemic. This issue of *NDQ* juxtaposes prose and poetry from a variety of languages and cultures, with the pieces constituting a global collection of voices, whether these be from centuries ago or the present moment. I'm thankful for sustained efforts like the *North Dakota Quarterly*, a journal that has been publishing continuously for over one hundred years, and for their contributions to arts and letters. It is the people at publications like *NDQ* that protect the archives that we need to remember, to document, to discuss, and to make sense of the realities of our time.

Grab a cup of whatever you're drinking these days, find a comfy chair, and enjoy the pieces in this section as they make their debuts in English. When you finish, feel free to make a quick list of values for yourself. No resolutions necessary.

Melissa Birkhofer  
Western Carolina University  
January 2022

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TATIANA ȚÎBULEAC

Translated by Jozefina Komporaly

## The Summer My Mother Had Green Eyes

### 1

That morning, when I found myself hating her more than ever, my mother turned thirty-nine. She was short and fat, ugly and stupid. She was by far the most hopeless mother ever. I kept staring at her from the window, watching as she just stood there at the school gates, like a beggar. I could have killed her without the slightest hesitation. As I was looking on, the other parents walked past me, silent and scared. A sad bunch of fake pearls and cheap ties, arriving to pick up their useless kids, so far successfully hidden from the eyes of the world. But at least they had put in the effort to climb up the stairs. My mother couldn't care less about me, or about the fact that I finally graduated from school.

I let her suffer for almost an hour, watching her as she'd first get angry, walking up and down along the fence, and then just stay put, on the verge of crying, looking every inch the wronged woman.

I decided not to come down yet, so I glued my face to the window instead and kept watching as all the other kids left the building, even Mars in his wheelchair, and even the orphans who could only look forward to a life revolving around drugs and hospices on the other side of the school gates.

Jim, my closest friend waved at me and shouted that I should make sure not to kill myself during the holidays. He was with his parents, who wouldn't have refrained from selling his organs on the black market had they not been concerned about setting tongues wagging. Jim's dazzlingly beautiful mother let out a long laugh, lifting her chin and flaunting her elaborately layered hair. Our psychotic class tutor and the math teacher also joined in the laughter, together with the head teacher—the only normal person in the entire school. In fact, we all laughed as if we had just heard a good joke. After all, the whole school adventure had been quite a joke. It no longer made any sense to pretend otherwise, seeing that we were among ourselves.

Besides, on the last day of school, our teachers would have laughed at anything only to see us out of the door. If not for good, then at least for the summer, during which half of them would have tried to find other



jobs. Some would indeed manage, and they'd disappear without a trace. The less lucky ones, however, were bound to return one autumn after another, and face the same diabolical students that they had hated and feared for so long. I tore my face away from the window, feeling like a used sticker. I was finally free, yet my future had something of the solemnity of an adorned cemetery.

I started to make my way down the stairs very slowly. When I got to the second floor, I came to a halt by the school psychiatrist's office and, using my keys, scratched the word *whore* into the wall. Had somebody seen me, I could have explained that this was my way of saying thanks for all those check-ups over the years. The corridors, however, were empty, as if after an earthquake. In our school, not even infections would prove to be chronic.

On the ground floor, looking like a piece of dog shit, was Kalo, my second best friend, smoking a cigarette while waiting for a distant aunt, who was meant to have him at her place for the coming week. Kalo's mother had left for Spain to work as a personal masseuse to a Russian oligarch—needless to say, these were his words. Except for Kalo, everybody knew what his mother was really doing for a living, but they chose to keep it to themselves because he was quite all right. He really was okay, a retard but essentially a good boy.

I asked him what his plans for after the week spent with the aunt were, until we were due to go to Amsterdam, and he said that he simply wouldn't do anything. Which was more or less what we were planning, too. Those who are nothing, do nothing. In all those years spent at school, I've never heard anyone boast of having been on a holiday—as if we were not just mad but also suffering from leprosy. It was enough for us that we were allowed to spend our summers off the leash and muzzle. What purpose would it serve to spend money on a holiday? I suddenly got sick at the mere thought of Kalo, Jim, and myself. We were basically nothing but human remains—a bunch of polyps and cysts, of the kind that had already been removed—yet we behaved as if we were fully functional kidneys and hearts. I have always liked anatomy. This is probably down to my mother, who should have become a biology teacher but ended up a pretzel seller instead. As it happens, there's nothing that I could possibly owe to my father.

Seeing that Kalo was so under the weather and trying to keep his eyes from hurting, I lingered on and smoked a cigarette with him, and remembered that he had an older sister married to an Irish farmer. I asked him

why he wouldn't just stay with her for this week, instead of the old hag. Kalo responded as if I was a total idiot. He'd go, of course, he would, she had already sent a limo to pick him up because she was dying to have such a nutcase around for the summer. As we were saying our goodbyes, I punched him on the head, and added that we'd see each other at the railway station in two weeks, and that he should under no circumstances spend all his money. Kalo's reply was brief, confirming that he'd of course be there.

As soon as she saw me, mother started to shout that I should hurry up, since she hadn't paid for parking. I lit another cigarette and got in the car. "You're smoking grass again, aren't you?" I heard her mumbling to herself. I opened the window and spat out, aiming straight at the school gates. The school started to fade away behind us, together with the seven years I had foolishly spent there, as if it all had been just a game of chance. Nothing had changed whatsoever. Mika was dead anyway, and I still felt the urge to hit people.

## 2

In addition to her other flaws, mother's face was always brilliant white, as if she had peeled her skin off before going to bed and kept it soaking in a tub of cream overnight. She had no wrinkles or moles whatsoever. She didn't smell, or have body hair, or display any other signs of normality. At times, I wondered whether she wasn't, in fact, just a piece of animated dough.

She had two breasts the size of rugby balls growing out of her armpits and pointing in different directions. Doll-like hair sprouted from her head, worn in plaits like a mermaid's tail. This mermaid's tail would drive me crazy, but as it happens, it was the favorite topic of conversation for the boys at my school. "The mermaid in heat" was their nickname for her, and they'd almost wet themselves while laughing whenever she'd come to pick me up. Father just called her "silly cow," and his new squeeze nicknamed her "kielbasa," meaning smoked sausage. Only I was obliged to call her "mother."

To this day, when I'm almost as old as she was that summer, I haven't met a worse-dressed woman. Not even during those two years when, right after the accident, I had lived in the North of France, near a fish processing plant. Imagine over a hundred ugly women who dress every single day for the sole purpose of killing crabs, shrimps, langoustines, and

other monstrosities. Yet mother would dress even more ridiculously. She was even uglier than these women, and would wear even worse trousers, blouses, and underwear than the entire factory, staff and crustaceans put together.

Had I been offered the chance, I would have swapped her with any other mother in the world in no time, even with a drunkard or someone inclined to beat me up on a daily basis. In that case, I would be the only one exposed to her drinking and battering, whereas now, her ugliness and mermaid's tail were visible to all. They were there to be seen by the boys at school. They were there to be seen by the teachers, and the people in our neighbourhood. The worst, however, was that they were there to be seen by Jude.

In the evenings when we'd walk home together after class—me not saying a word the whole journey, and she talking nonsense all along the way—I simply wouldn't be able to bear her presence. I'd feel like putting her into the washing machine at the boil wash cycle. Or squeezing her into the freezer and taking her out only once she had crumbled into pieces. Or radiating her. In those moments, when all I had in mind were the faces of my colleagues, distorted by laughter, and that of a languid Jude, actually enjoying their dirty jokes, I just wanted her dead at all costs.

I knew full well that everyone was laughing at me. I knew that the boys would regularly spit at me as I was walking past, and Jude would positively despise me. I knew that I was a nobody, and that it would have made much more sense to drown or hang or shoot myself, or to carry out any number of similar things. Anything would have been much better than what I happened to be: the disgusting offspring of a creature with a white complexion.

## 3

As far as my father's contribution is concerned, I don't even want to mention it. Just thinking about him would make me throw up. He managed to escape from mother, leaving her for a Polish woman with a pierced tongue. He had divorced her though, because killing her, despite being the faster option, not to mention his preferred one, would have led him to prison. Father would have killed me, too, had he not been certain that I'd die anyway fairly soon.

The divorce was short and turned out in his favor. Being a complete idiot, however, mother thought that she had won. For about a week, she

kept ringing her only friend, another sales assistant, telling her about how she managed to make that moron crack because I was left in her custody. Grandma understood the gist, but she didn't say anything to mother. "At least she's pleased about something, let her be," she told me. I can't even begin to imagine father's joy when he heard the judge's verdict. I think he probably wet himself, so delighted he must have been. To get rid, at the same time, of two people you'd pay good money to see dead—was too much of a good thing, even for a lorry driver.

This is the way my mother looked the morning she turned thirty-nine. I would have happily traded her in at a scrap metal yard, and would have started with her hair. Only one detail didn't quite fit in with this entire saga—her eyes. Mother had such beautiful green eyes that it seemed wrong to let them go to waste on a face like hers.

## 4

My mother's eyes were all wrong.

## 5

We finally made it home, and I went straight to my bedroom. I found it strange that mother kept quiet all along the way, but I thought this was because of grandma, who was taken to hospital overnight. Hoping to make herself feel a little more festive, mother had baked a cheesecake and bought ten bottles of beer. I told her, not without a certain malicious delight, that I didn't buy her a present. She told me that she didn't mind. I really envied her ability to ignore the obvious. After all, I hated her, and so did my father and her only friend, the shop assistant. Mika was dead. Still, she had baked a cake and bought some beer. If only grandma was around, but she wasn't, and this meant that no one, absolutely no one in the world gave a rat's arse about her, her birthday, or her life for that matter.

I turned to my daily ritual of counting my money for Amsterdam—as if the act of mere counting would help it multiply. I still had the whole amount, but it was far from what I would have liked to have. I could no longer steal from grandma, because she had changed the lock and possibly even the hiding place, not to mention that she also told me, in no uncertain terms, that she wouldn't pay for any sex or drugs. As I was trying to figure out other options—all with criminal undertones—mother knocked on my door, inviting me to dinner. I told her to bugger off, as I

wasn't at all hungry, but she said that she had prepared some baked apples for me.

She knew how to play tricks on people, this was a dominant trait of hers. Besides, her dumb face would always sport an almost childish wonder that would disarm even those who'd regularly purchase cheap food at astronomical prices from her. As for me, I followed her to the kitchen. Baked apples were my weakness after all.

The festive table looked as if somebody had simply hung a garland on a dustbin. On our new waxed tablecloth decorated with poppies—new stock had recently come in to the shop where grandma worked—mother had laid out all sorts of disgusting items: fish liver pate, pickled gherkins, dry salami with chunky bits of fat, chicken wings baked in mayonnaise, herrings in vinegar; in short—her favorite dishes. It was obvious that she had been to Kalinka—the Russian deli where her friend Kasza worked—and that she had already toasted herself with some vodka. In pride of place, in the middle of the table, was a platter of baked apples and a three-liter jar of peach compote—all for me. The apples were fabulous, I had four. The compote, on the other hand, was made by grandma, so it wasn't anything special. As for the rest, I didn't touch any of it.

I stayed much longer at the table than I had initially intended. I actually felt rather awkward seeing that she hadn't received a single present from anyone. Not that she would have deserved any, but she was always very considerate with everyone, and would buy lovely flowers and expensive items even for father's half-witted relatives. So I lingered on, feeling every inch as if I was at a wake.

Meanwhile, mother would carry on with her usual rubbish about stuff she had no idea about: migrant rights, reincarnation, or renewable energy. I felt like biting her tongue off, tearing it out altogether, or putting it through the shredder. My only way of keeping calm was to look out of the window—and I have been doing this for around half an hour. Somebody had dropped a bag with some cream in it, so now there were white splashes smeared all over the block. I actually found this rather charming, to me it looked as if it had snowed. Or as if some snowmen, clearly out of their minds, had started a fight and carried on until they had all melted away. In any case, I found it a nice change. As a rule, when leaving the flat in the morning, I'd only stumble upon cigarette butts and phlegm on the floor. According to grandma, people were tempted to spit on our doorstep because we were the richest in Haringey. In a sense, she was right—we weren't much loved in the area—but actually grandma was rather stu-

pid. She thought that everyone who could afford some salami was rich. Besides, she was blind, so she couldn't see things very clearly anyway.

At one point, mother started to behave really strangely: she wouldn't finish her sentences, just suddenly pause and start collecting all the food from the table, even though she hadn't guzzled it all up yet. Something had snapped in her, but I couldn't figure out what. I even thought that she had perhaps finally understood how awkward this whole muddled celebration was, the two of us trying to look like a happy family.

I wished her a happy birthday—even though this was rather far-fetched—and then got up to leave. Mother didn't hear me, though. She had just taken the cake out of the fridge. It looked like bird droppings, only much bigger, and asked me to help her blow the candles out. "Please, Aleksy, come on, this may well be my last time," she laughed. At least she had the common sense to light only a single candle, yet she had of course bought forty. Just in case some wouldn't light. Next, she suddenly turned pale and told me that we had something important to discuss.

Almost an entire hour went by, during which she was the only one who spoke, yet I still didn't know what to make of any of this. It was obvious that she had lost her mind. For me, the question was whether I could make any personal gain of this situation. I told her that I'd think about this overnight, and retired to my room. In the morning, I found her sleeping with her head on the kitchen table and her hands covered in cake, surrounded by six empty beer bottles.

So I decided to go along with her plan.

SPARTAKOS ANAGNOSTARAS

---

**Children**

We were swallows  
me and you my sweetheart  
flying down to touch flowers in bloom

When the summer  
was coming to its end  
you were looking at the night sky

For me you were the horizon  
and your words  
were made of feathers

The trees were holding their breath  
as you were resting your head  
on my shoulder

You were a good listener  
You could hear our voices  
and all distant voices in despair

You could even hear the song  
of a swallow  
trapped in a marquee

Calling its mate  
to help it  
to get out to the sea

Listen  
and learn the lyrics  
you said

We were one person  
We were together  
the world

You used to tell me  
that swallows  
are stars

During the winter  
they fly  
to the lunar surface

**Παιδιά**

Ήμασταν χελιδόνια  
εγώ και εσύ καλή μου  
πετώντας κάτω για να αγγίξουμε  
λουλούδια ανθισμένα

Όταν το καλοκαίρι  
έφτανε στο τέλος του  
Κοιτούσες τον νυχτερινό ουρανό

Για μένα ήσουν ο ορίζοντας  
και τα λόγια σου  
ήταν φτιαγμένα από φτερά

Τα δέντρα κρατούσαν την ανάσα τους  
καθώς ακουμπούσες το κεφάλι σου  
στον ώμο μου

Ήσουν καλή ακροάτρια  
Μπορούσες να ακούσεις τις φωνές μας  
και όλες τις μακρινές φωνές σε απόγνωση

Μπορούσες και να ακούσεις το τραγούδι  
ενός χελιδονιού  
παγιδευμένο σε πλαστική σκηνή

Καλώντας τη σύντροφό του  
να το βοηθήσει  
να βγει στη θάλασσα

Άκου  
και μάθε τους στίχους  
είπες

Ήμασταν ένα  
Ήμασταν μαζί  
ο κόσμος

μου έλεγες ότι  
τα χελιδόνια  
είναι αστέρια

Κατά τη διάρκεια του χειμώνα  
πετούν  
στη σεληνιακή επιφάνεια

You used to tell me  
that without destination  
there is no beginning

μου έλεγες ότι  
χωρίς προορισμό  
δεν υπάρχει αρχή

We were  
one world of opposites  
that changed

Ήμασταν  
ένας κόσμος αντιθέτων  
που άλλαξε

We were like  
and then  
we were unlike

Ήμασταν όμοιοι  
και μετά  
ήμασταν διαφορετικοί

I was the summer  
You were the waves  
and the shells that I gather now

Ήμουν το καλοκαίρι  
Ήσουν τα κύματα  
και τα κοχύλια που μαζεύω τώρα

Memory  
of the distant  
ocean

Ανάμνηση  
του μακρινού  
ωκεανού

Be sure to come back  
Be bold to meet me again  
you would tell me

Φρόντισε να επιστρέψεις  
Να είσαι τολμηρός να με συναντήσεις ξανά  
μου έλεγες

I am now drowning  
in memories  
A waterfall of punishing emotions

Τώρα πνίγομαι  
στις αναμνήσεις  
Ένας καταρράκτης εκδικητικών  
συναισθημάτων

To fly away was your return  
and your return was  
to fly away

Το να πετάξεις ήταν η επιστροφή σου  
και η επιστροφή σου ήταν  
να πετάξεις μακριά

When swallows continued  
coming back to their childhood  
you did not

Όταν τα χελιδόνια συνέχισαν να  
επιστρέφουν στα παιδικά τους χρόνια  
Εσύ δεν γύρισες

Have you ever dreamed the same sky  
that we imagined  
as kids?

Έχεις ονειρευτεί ποτέ τον ίδιο ουρανό  
που φανταζόμασταν  
σαν παιδιά;



## My unfinished poem

A wooden time capsule box  
on my desk tonight  
I wait for the Muse

born from the dust  
of dark stars  
and distant galaxies

Silent reminders of the  
previous summers  
next to my old pen

a calendar  
and a string of worry beads  
to pass the time

while a tied June beetle  
tries to fly  
away from my frightened words

Going from my present  
to one-hundred-million-year-old  
past

after a fossilized tiny crab  
tries in vain to walk sideways  
to expand my verses

Preserved memories in amber  
flirt with my  
inner voice

before it makes the leap  
from my beating heart  
to talking paper

My evening poem  
Trapped calmness  
in ocean of ink

## Το ημιτελές ποίημά μου

Ένα ξύλινο κουτί, μια χρονοκάψουλα  
στο γραφείο μου απόψε  
Περιμένω τη Μούσα

που γεννήθηκε από τη σκόνη  
σκοτεινών αστεριών  
και μακρινών γαλαξιών

Σιωπηλές υπενθυμίσεις  
τα προηγούμενα καλοκαίρια  
δίπλα στο παλιό μου στυλό

ένα ημερολόγιο  
και μια σειρά από χάντρες  
για να περάσει η ώρα

ενώ ένα δεμένο σκαθάρι του Ιουνίου  
προσπαθεί να πετάξει  
μακριά από τα φοβισμένα μου λόγια

Πηγαίνω από το παρόν μου  
στο 100 εκατομμυρίων ετών  
παρελθόν

ενώ ένα απολιθωμένο μικροσκοπικό  
καβούρι  
προσπαθεί μάταια να περπατήσει στο  
πλάι  
για να επεκτείνει τους στίχους μου

Διατηρημένες μνήμες σε κεχριμπάρι  
φλερτάρουν με το δική μου  
εσωτερική φωνή

πριν κάνει το άλμα  
από την καρδιά μου που χτυπάει  
στο χαρτί ομιλίας

Το βραδινό μου ποίημα  
Παγιδευμένη ηρεμία  
σε ωκεανό του μελανιού

DMITRY BLIZNIUK

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Translated by Sergey Gerasimov

***May I?***

An unfamiliar planet  
is straight ahead.  
A blue summer dress,  
a tinted statue  
wrapped in thin paper,  
her gray eyes.  
She has let my glance in—into the gray grottos,  
and I, unexpectedly for myself,  
burst in as  
a flickering flock of noctules.  
This moment has absorbed so many impossible things,  
I won the lottery of drawbridges.  
A flying bullet stopped above your head,  
and asked, hovering,  
“May I?”

## A Rainy Day

A rainy day, a lusterless sun–  
like an old man urinating through a catheter.  
In a minute,  
a napalm of rain–  
hole-ridden, like glass cheese gnawed through by mice–  
will crash down onto the city,  
while buildings lining the avenue  
are concrete mice gnawed through by that cheese,  
and I'm embracing you on the balcony–  
a spring trap that persuaded the fox to stay . . .  
Sunrise, and then again, the dried crust of the stairway,  
a crust in which old hags and mice gnawed an entrance,  
but forgot the exit . . .

DOROS LOIZOU

Translated by Peter J. King and Andrea Christofidou

### Νέα Υόρκη, 1968

Δεν υπάρχει ελευθερία  
μέσα σ' αυτά τα τετράγωνα.

Δεν υπάρχει θρησκεία  
που να πείθει για λύτρωση.

Τα χέρια μας, πικρά κι ανώφελα  
ανταμώνουν στο χάος και χάνονται.

Η ψυχή χάνει την πίστη  
και μαθαίνει το θάνατο.

Ένα θάνατο  
αργό, βέβαιο κι άσκημο.

Όλοι έχουν λοξοδρομήσει . . . όλοι.  
Κι η σημαία χάσκει εγκαταλεημένη.

Και  
δεν έχω άλλη εκλογή  
παρά  
να μένω στα υπόγεια αλχημιστής.  
Στα σοφά  
στα μυστικά  
στα ενδόμυχα.

## New York, 1968

There's no freedom  
in these blocks.

There's no religion  
promising redemption.

Our hands make contact, bitterly  
and fruitlessly in chaos, and are lost.

The spirit loses faith  
and learns of death.

A death that's  
ugly, slow, and sure.

All are apostates . . . yes, all of them.  
The tattered flag's forsaken.

And  
I have no option  
but  
to stay, an alchemist, beneath the ground.  
In the wise  
in the secret  
in the innermost.

## Πέμπτη Λεωφόρος, Νέα Υόρκη<sup>1</sup>

Θεέ μου,  
χειρονομούν και μιλούν  
με χίλιους δυό τρόπους  
πασκίζουν για έκφραση  
και τίποτε δεν καταφέρνουν  
γυροφέροντας στα ίδια και τα ίδια  
αναμασώντας την αχρηστία τους.  
Κι όλα τούτα τα καμώματα  
τα τόσα σχήματα και χρώματα,  
Θεέ μου,  
κανένα μα κανένα έχουν προορισμό.  
Και καταλήγουν στη λεπτομέρεια  
γεμίζοντας τις καρδιές τους  
ρυτίδες, λίγδα, σκοτάδι. Ο θάνατος.

Είναι παλιό το παραμύθι.  
Κουράστηκα να το λέω:  
« . . . τα πουλιά δεν θα σε σώσουν,  
ούτε οι παρδαλοί σου οι φίλοι,  
ούτε τα ταξίδια, ούτε τα όνειρα . . . »

Πάει πια  
η ζωή σου κατάντησε  
μια μεταχειρισμένη υπόθεση,  
όπως οι χλιοπατημένοι δρόμοι της Νέας Υόρκης.

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<sup>1</sup> Δημοσιεύτηκαν στο περιοδικό Πολιτιστική, τ. 14–15, σελ. 202–203

## Fifth Avenue, New York<sup>2</sup>

Oh god,  
they talk and gesture  
in a thousand different ways,  
striving to express themselves  
and having no success  
going over the same old things  
and brooding on their uselessness.  
And all of these shenanigans,  
these colors and designs,  
oh god,  
and none of it is going anywhere.  
They end up with their hearts  
crammed full of petty details—  
wrinkles, dirt, and darkness.                      Death.

It's such an old, old tale.  
I'm tired of telling it:  
“... the birds won't save you,  
nor your flashy friends,  
nor traveling, nor dreams...”

It's all too late—  
your life has ended up  
a shabby, used affair,  
just like the ever-trampled New York streets.

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<sup>2</sup> Original first published in *Πολιτιστική* 14–15, pp. 202–203.

## Μα ως πότε πια!

Ως πότε πια να κάθομαι  
 να γεμίζω τα χαρτιά με μελάνι  
 να πνίγομαι μέσα σε φτωχές αναμνήσεις;  
 Τί μου στέλνεις τούτα τα πρόσωπα  
 που ν' αγαπήσουν, ούτε ν' αγαπηθούν ξέρουν;  
 που δε μπορούν ν' αγαπήσουν  
 ούτε τα μάτια μου, ούτε την ποίηση;  
 τί μου τα στέλνεις  
 και μου γεμίζουν τα χέρια αγκάθια,  
 το πουκάμισο κόκκινους λεκέδες  
 τη ψυχή μου μουχλιασμένα σύννεφα;  
 τί μου στέλνεις τούτες τις νεκρόμασκες  
 να μου κλέβουν τη σκέψη, τις ώρες, το αίμα μου;  
 Τί να τους πώ, τί να τους δείξω για να πιστέψουν  
 που τ'αυτιά τους γέμισαν τσιμέντο  
 και τα μάτια τους τσιγαρόσκηνη;  
 Ω ήλιε, ήλιε αδελφέ μου,  
 μόνο στη φωτιά σου θα ξεδιψάσω.  
 Οι προδομένοι άγγελοι  
 ας δικαιολογήσουν την πίκρα μου.  
 Η άνοδος είναι ο αντικατοπτρισμός  
 του βυθίσματος στο έρεβος.  
 Άγγελοι, σκεπάστε με στις φτερούγες σας.  
 Διψώ, καίομαι,. Βοήθεια! Νερό, Φώς!



## But How Much Longer!

How much longer must I sit  
and cover documents with ink,  
and drown in faulty memories?  
What do you send these people to me for,  
who don't know how to love or to be loved?  
Who can neither love my eyes nor love my poetry?  
Why do you send them to me,  
filling both my hands with thorns,  
my shirt with bloody stains,  
my soul with clouds of mildew?  
Why do you send these death masks to me,  
robbing me of reason, time, and blood?  
What should I show or tell them  
to convince them  
that their ears are filled up with cement,  
their eyes with cigarette ash?  
O sun, sun, my brother!  
Only your fire can relieve my thirst.  
Let the angels who have been betrayed  
excuse my bitterness.  
The journey upwards mirrors  
the descent into the darkness.  
Angels, spread your wings above me.  
I thirst, I burn.  
Help me!  
Water, Light!

## Επειδή . . .

Επειδή πολύ μιλήσαμε για σένα  
 πολύ ελπίσαμε, πολύ απελπιστήκαμε.  
 Επειδή πολύ σ' αγαπήσαμε  
 πολλές νύχτες, πολλές άδειες νύχτες.  
 Επειδή τόσο πολύ σε στοχαστήκαμε  
 τόσο πολύ σ' αναζητήσαμε  
 μέσα στο αίμα  
 μέσα στο φώς  
 μέσα στις λέξεις  
 μέσα στη σιωπή  
 μέσα στο όνειρο  
 που στο τέλος έγινες και σύ όνειρο  
 περνώντας έτσι, άνεμος μέσα στον άνεμο.

Τώρα μετροφυλλούμε βιβλία  
 γράφουμε ποιήματα για εφημερίδες  
 μοιράζουμε με την ίδια απερισκεψία  
 το σκοτάδι και το φώς,  
 ύστερα ολοένα αλλάζουμε  
 σπίτια, ιδεολογίες, γυναίκες, πατρίδα . . .

Θα μπορέσουμε άραγέ, έτσι;  
 Θα μπορέσουμε να ξεγελάσουμε την καρδιά μας;

## Because . . .

Because we talked so much about you  
hoped so much, lost so much hope.  
Because we loved you so much  
for so many nights, so many empty nights.  
Because we had you so much on our minds  
spent so much effort seeking you  
    in blood  
    in light  
    in words  
    in soundlessness  
    in dream  
in the end you too became a dream  
passing through like wind  
    in wind.

Now we leaf through books  
write poetry for magazines  
in this fashion frivolously sharing out  
both light and darkness;  
afterwards we keep on changing  
    houses,  
        ideologies,  
        our wives,  
            our homeland . . .

Shall we thus be able to, I wonder?  
Shall we be able to deceive our hearts?

## Νεοέλληνες<sup>3</sup>

Πληγωμένοι κι άθλιοι,  
 θλιβεροί απόηχοι μιας παρατονισμένης μελωδίας,  
 προσπαθούμε να μιμηθούμε άλλους καιρούς περασμένους  
 όπου ξεγελαστήκαμε λατρεύοντας είδωλα,  
 θεούς μίζερους, ιερείς εκφυλισμένους.

Πούναι, αδελφέ μου, το αρχαίο σου κλέος;  
 Ρημαγμένη ανεμόμυλε της Μυκόνου, πούναι τα φτερά σου;  
 Αιγαίο, Αιγαίο, τούτος ο λαός ως πότε θα σ' αγνοεί;  
 Δία, Δία, φτηνέ θεέ,  
 ο τόπος σου ρημάζεται και σύ, κακό χρόνο νάχεις,  
 ερωτοτροπείς με τον Ερμή;

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<sup>3</sup> Δημοσιεύτηκαν στο περιοδικό Πολιτιστική, τ. 14–15, σελ. 202–203

## The New Greeks<sup>4</sup>

Damaged and downcast,  
sad echoes of a jarring tune,  
we try to mimic times gone by—  
bamboozled by idolators,  
ill-tempered gods,  
corrupted priests.

Where's your ancient glory, brother?  
Mykonos windmill,  
standing in ruins,  
where are your sails?  
Aegean, O Aegean, how much longer  
will this people disregard you?  
Zeus, O Zeus, you cut-price god,  
your land is being laid to waste,  
and you  
—bad cess to you—  
are dallying with Hermes?

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<sup>4</sup> Original first published in *Πολιτιστική* 14–15, pp. 202–203.

## Ξεχείλισμα

Έ, κοπέλα μου,  
 εδώ τσακίζουν χέρια για ένα όνειρο,  
 μνουχίζουν για ένα φυλλάδιο,  
 σπάζουν δόντια για ένα τραγούδι,  
 εδώ σκοτώνουν για ένα χαμόγελο.  
 Και σύ, ω εσύ,  
 τολμάς να μου μιλάς  
 για πεταλούδες και πράσινα άλογα;

Έ, κοπέλλα μου,  
 εδώ κάτω από τα παράθυρα σου  
 πετροβολούν την ελευθερία  
 σαν νάναι η χειρότερη πόρνη  
 και σύ . . . ω εσύ . . .  
 για όνομα του θεού, ένα κερί!

## Outburst

Hey look, girl,  
round here  
they crush hands for a dream,  
geld for a pamphlet,  
break teeth for a song,  
round here  
they kill for the hint of a smile.  
And you,  
oh you,  
you've got the nerve  
to witter on to me  
of butterflies  
and bilge like that?

Hey look, girl,  
here beneath your window  
they're throwing stones at freedom  
as if she were the worst of whores,  
and you . . .  
oh you . . .  
in god's name,  
a candle!

## JUANA PEÑATE MONTEJO

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Translated by Carol Rose Little and Charlotte Milholland Friedman

Juana Peñate Montejoare is a poet who writes in Ch'ol, a Mayan language spoken by a quarter million people in southern Mexico.

### **Iñaxań majtyań ty'ań matye'lum**

Mi kcha'leń k'ay tyi ñaxań majtyań ty'ań icha'ańbä matye'lum,  
mi kwa'tyäl tyi isońil ñäch'tyälel,  
mi kña'tyań ch'äm majlel ikäñlawlel jińi matye'wits,  
iyejtyal yiköty weń uts'atybä kächäl kbäk'tyal.

### **First Voice**

I sing, a voice gifted by the forest,  
in a dance of silence, I stand.

The sound of a wild mountain  
bound to me, such beauty.



## Chuchu'

Tsa' jk'aja koj tyi apusik'al kchuchu',  
 jiñi kaxlañ ña'tyibal woli imiloñ, woli its'u'oñ.  
 Che' jiñi tsa' tyili ach'ujlel bajche' lakmam:  
 Jatyety ipäk'ilety matye'el, icha'añety  
 ch'ixikña kch'ujlel tsa' majli,  
 kbäk'tyal tsa' sujtyi che' bajche' chajk.

## Chuchu'

Chuchu', I rest in your heart.  
 Thoughts of the kaxlañ were strangling me, devouring me,  
 then your spirit came like thunder.  
 You are of the forest, you belong to it.  
 My soul shook,  
 my body became lightning.

*Chuchu'*: grandmother  
*kaxlañ*: non-indigenous

## **Ipusik'al kolem pa'**

Jiñi axñal icha'añ ch'ujtye'  
jiñäch cha'añ kty'añ tyi ityojlel lum yik'oty ja,  
kbäk'tyal jiñäch ipusik'al kolem pa'.

## **Heart of a river**

Cedar's shadow,  
my language from earth and water.  
My body, heart of a river.

## Tatuch

Tatuch ipaty ili ñoxi' otyoty,  
tsa' ikéleyety,  
jiñäch tyamlel woli its'is awe'tyel,  
ñumeñixbä, wolibä iyujtyel mi ikälel,  
iyutslel aty'añ ila tyi lum.  
Ilayi, añ ip'ätyälel ak'ay  
ak'aba, aty'añ awejtyal,  
ilayi, tyi ipaty ili otyoty, ktatuch  
wächumul asuboñel yikoty ach'ujulty'añ.

## Tatuch

The walls of this old house,  
witness.  
Your world sewn by time,  
past and future together,  
your language, its wisdom, in this soil.  
Here, your song continues  
your name, your voice, your spirit,  
here, in the walls of this house,  
your words and prayers live.

*Tatuch*: grandfather

## Kyejtyal

Itsãñälel klum  
mi kchumtyañ ach'ichèl  
che' bajche' p'ip'bä x-ixik  
mi käsiñ ty'uchtyañ majlel pañumil.

## Footprints

Cold earth,  
I live in your blood.  
An intelligent woman,  
I walk lightly through the world.

## JAIME PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ

## Unpublished Haikus

These Haikus were written in Tseltal and translated into Spanish by Jaime Pérez González.

Danny Law translated these three Haikus into English (for a class). Jaime Pérez González took Danny Law's English translation and adapted Haiku 1 and 2 to match the corresponding metric in English. Haiku 3 corresponds to Danny Law's original translation into English.

Tseltal	Spanish	English
Jayku 1	Haiku 1	Haiku 1
Ja' i jk'optik to, ja' sk'op ajawetike. Ja' sk'op Mayaetik.	Nuestra lengua ésta, lengua de los dioses es. Es la voz maya.	This, our language is, is the language of the gods. It's the Mayan voice
Jayku 2	Haiku 2	Haiku 2
Sk'opon kajwaltik, sit-yelawon te jme'-jtat. Bats'il jtseltalon.	Soy la voz de dios, soy el rostro de mi ancestro. Tseltal puro soy.	I'm the voice of god, the face of my ancestor. I am pure Tseltal
Jayku 3	Haiku 3	Haiku 3
Jtseltal jts'unbal laj, te boonax ta <i>gringo</i> lum, laj k'op te mats'e.	Que es tseltal mi raíz, mas a tierras gringas fui, y adiós al pozol.	Tseltal is my root, but I went to gringo land, and goodbye pozol <sup>1</sup>

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1. A Mayan drink made from boiled and ground corn grains.

## Embriaguez poética<sup>2</sup>

**This poem was originally written in Spanish, translated into Tzeltal and English by the author.**

Un trago de poesía para el alma,  
un sorbo de embriaguez penetrada en la esencia de lo etéreo.  
Poemas para extinguir el día,  
noches de insomnio para agradecer al alba.

Es menester diluir el corazón para embriagar la poesía,  
desmoronar el ser para consumir la palabra.  
Vamos a mutarnos mi poesía,  
¡Vamos a parir la esencia de la de lo intangible!

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2. This is a slightly different poem based on one published in Tzeltal and Spanish with the titles “Chi’il ja” and “Agua dulce” in *Yolitia, Revista en lengua náhuatl*, Número 2, Julio 2016, page 43: [https://issuu.com/vitepoxteco/docs/yolitia\\_2\\_opt](https://issuu.com/vitepoxteco/docs/yolitia_2_opt). The versions here were modified and improved from the Tzeltal and Spanish versions. The English version is new. Pseudonyms used by the author in that publication was *Jmamtik Bar-buxtik* and *Tarzán*.

## Syakubelal xnichimal-k'op

Jlojp ya'lel xnichimal-k'op ta stojol te ch'ulelal,  
jlojp yala yakubelal te ochem ta swinkilal k'inal.  
Xnichimal-k'op ta slajinel k'aal,  
yajk'abal muk-wayel yu'un te yakel wokol ta stojol te sakubel-k'inal.

Ya sk'an ya yich' ulubtesel te o'tanil yu'un a te ya yich' yakubtesel-a te xnichimal-  
k'ope,  
sp'uytesel ants-winiik yu'un te ya yich' bikel te k'ope.  
Kon jk'atp'untetik jbatik ta junax xnichimal-jk'op,  
;Kon kayintetik te xch'ulelal te bin ma spas ta pikele!

## Drunkness of poetry

A drink of poetry for the soul,  
a sip of drunkenness penetrated into the essence of the ethereal.  
Poems to extinguish the day,  
sleepless nights to thank the dawn.

It is needful to dilute the heart to inebriate the poetry,  
to crumble the being to consume the word.  
Let's mutate my poesy,  
let's give birth to the essence of the intangible!



## Introduction to the Poetry of Muyaka bin Haji al-Ghassaniy

Muyaka bin Haji al-Ghassaniy (1776–1840) was the earliest secular Swahili poet whose identity is known. His poems were not formally published in his lifetime, as their dissemination was primarily oral. In the late 1880s, the Swahili scholars William Ernest Taylor and Mwalimu Sikujua spent three years gathering and transcribing his poems, likely saving his body of work from being lost to posterity. There is no record of these scholars finding any original manuscripts; they relied on the memories of Mombasa's elders. The fact that they were able to recover over 180 poems is a testament to the tenacity of their research, as well as the significance of Muyaka's work to the people of nineteenth-century Mombasa.

In the Swahili canon, prosody is paramount. Muyaka is notable as an early master of the *mashairi* quatrain form, which remains so predominant that the word *mashairi* is synonymous with *poetry* in modern Swahili. While the form's syllable count and rhyme scheme may appear rigid, in Muyaka's precise and playful hands, this rigidity turns razor-sharp. The inverted rhymes at the end of each stanza invoke surprise, juxtaposition, and concatenation at every juncture of the poem. I believe capturing these rhymes is the *sine qua non* of translating Muyaka. Rhyme is not just an aesthetic choice, but a worldview unto itself, insisting that a chaotic universe can be put into order—no small matter during the upheaval of Muyaka's lifetime, when embattled Mombasa had periods as a British protectorate, an Omani satellite, and an independent state of disputed status under the feudal Mazrui dynasty (who were patrons of Muyaka).

Lyndon Harries has credited Muyaka with bringing Swahili poetry "out of the mosque and into the marketplace." Prior to the nineteenth century, Swahili verse was dominated by two genres—the religious (moralistic sermons and paraphrased narratives from the Quran) and the epic (namely a cycle depicting the exploits of a thirteenth-century warrior prince named Fumo Liyongo). Muyaka distinguished himself with his secular and topical subject matter. The poems in this selection give a sense of his versatility. His tone ranges from caustic humor to somber elegy, and he proves himself knowledgeable in matters nautical, agricultural,

psychological, and metaphysical. Often, his metaphors will carry political and/or amorous subtext; for instance, the hornet's nest in "Go Beat On the Hive" is likely a warning to a political figure who meted out an incorrect punishment, and the sunken boat in "My Dinghy" records the death of his first wife.

MUYAKA BIN HAJI AL-GHASSANIY

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Translated by Richard Prins

**Go Beat On the Hive**

Whoever committed these sins committed them with a plan.  
He took his boat for a spin and then beached it on dry land.  
Don't speak as if I'm your kin while you're holding folly's hand.  
A hornet sting made you mad; you went to beat on the hive.

If you were really a sage, then you would know evil too.  
Whatever pleases the stage, that's what you keep clinging to.  
When you die it's your own name by which they remember you.  
Today a hornet stings you, so go and beat on the hive.

You have done what isn't done. A true abomination.  
You have sown what isn't sown. This tree is tribulation.  
You have gone where isn't gone. Your path is desolation.  
You feel the hornet's poison, so go on, beat on that hive!

## Wenda Lionea Tumba

*Original Swahili text of "Go Beat On the Hive"*

Mtenzi wa saya mambo atenzile kwa welevu,  
Alipoyoleza sambo ikolea nt'i kavu!  
Sambe nijawe mwajimbo, uloshika upumbavu  
Ulioumwa ni mavu ukalionea tumba

Laiti kwamba waona wengeyajua maovu,  
Yapendezao msana ukayashika kwa nguvu  
Ufapo ni lako jina lipetwe wakumbukivu  
Leo waumwa ni mavu wenda lionea tumba?

Umetenda hayatendwi; kutenda utendekevu  
Umepanda haupandwi; mti huo ni muovu  
Umekwenda hayenendwi, ndia hiyo ni pòtevu!  
Leo kuumwa ni mavu wenda lionea tumba!

## All of It Dies Inside You

Oh! The world is deserted, and so are its denizens.  
Open your eyes, observe it. Don't just call it a slogan.  
Nothing remains of solace, happiness, or elation.  
What lives within the within, all of it dies inside you.

When you say this is torture, the worst abomination,  
Then you will see more horrors, without alleviation.  
But dawn is drawing nearer, and joy is its decision.  
What lives within the within, all of it dies inside you.

Take care not to look away, you people of distinction.  
All the blessings have escaped, for future generations.  
We reap not like the old days, although we still have villains.  
What lives within the within, all of it dies inside you.

The lakes are drained and shriveled, no water in the basins.  
They've swept away the rubble, and cleaned out every cavern.  
Even the rains have dwindled, there is no thunder clapping.  
What lives within the within, all of it dies inside you.

I have reached the finale. I'll keep my story condensed.  
It's not like I am happy, recounting these past events.  
The things that really bug me are malice and misfortune.  
What lives within the within, all of it dies inside you.

## Mangi Mafilia Ndani

*Original Swahili text of "All of It Dies Inside You"*

Ai! dunia t'ongole na wakazi waliomo,  
Nanywi tunzani muole, sambeni kuwa ni simo.  
Hapakusaa kisale cha nyemi na materemo.  
Yaliyo mumo ya mumo, mangi mafilia ndani.

Wambapo sili ni tule, likuzie chakwe kimo,  
Utaona na hayale usiyapate ukomo.  
Kuna kucha kulichele, ziukilie nderemo:  
Yaliyo mumo ya mumo, mangi mafilia ndani.

Tunzani, msifumbile, enywi wakuu wa vimo,  
Baraka ziondoshile za kivyazi na kilimo.  
Hakuvunwi kama kale wak'ulima wangawamo.  
Yaliyo mumo ya mumo, mangi mafilia ndani.

Maziwa ya kuk'utile maweka maji hayamo,  
Fusize lalifusile hata katika mashimo,  
Mvua ipungulile ya radi na mit'it'imo,  
Yaliyo mumo ya mumo, mangi mafilia ndani.

Tamati nalikomile kufupiliza masemo,  
Si kwamba nifurahile naweleza yaliyomo,  
Ambayo yanitukile ya utesi na gugumo,  
Yaliyo mumo ya mumo, mangi mafilia ndani.

## What Is Mine Is Yours

Don't remind me of that time when my folks were still alive.  
Always a crowd in our home; I knew what was on your mind.  
Now we remain here alone. No confidantes have survived.  
Are your thoughts the same as mine, or do you have another?

You only make me bitter, speaking about this sorrow,  
Leaving my heart encumbered by its constant state of woe.  
In what way have I blundered? How did I fail you so?  
My fault is your fault also. Or do you have another?

You tell me there's no scandal. I'm a gentleman, freeborn,  
Gracious as well as noble, who can understand your words.  
Don't do anything shameful; remove my cause for concern.  
Is my doubt the same as yours, or do you have another?

If you have no use for me, please don't surprise me with it.  
Beside you I feel no peace. I become mute and private.  
I cannot cut my tongue free, I am so undelighted.  
Is my spirit your spirit, or do you have another?

## Hili Langu Ndilo Lako

*Original Swahili text of "What Is Mine Is Yours"*

Usiniambie papale mama na baba aliko,  
Na wat'u wajee tele, hajua shauri lako  
Leoe ni pweke tukele, na washauri hawako,  
Hili langu ndilo lako, au una jinginele?

Wanizidia matungu kuongea sikitiko,  
Kutoshusha moyo wangu kwa hali ya pujuliko,  
Ni ipi khatia yangu niloikosa kwako?  
Hili langu ndilo lako, au una jinginele?

Unambiapo si t'ua muungwana mwenye mbeko,  
Mtukufu wa muruwa, mwelewa wa matamko.  
Sifanye isiyokuwa, nitoa langu sumbuko!  
Hili langu ndilo lako, au una jinginele?

Kwamba huna haja nami usinionye vituko,  
Nijiinamile sisemi, kwako wewe sina suko.  
Satui wangu ulimi si nyemi, sina kiteko.  
Hili langu ndilo lako, au una jinginele?



## My Dinghy

The first boat I ever owned. I cherish my old dinghy.  
In squalls she held her own, though she could be unsteady.  
But one gloomy night she drowned at Ngozoa-Maji.  
Now I ponder memories, and stick to calmer waters.

My boat, my darling boat, the one I used to paddle.  
She delighted me the most, that playful little vessel.  
We floated along the coast, showing the waves her mettle.  
Today my thoughts won't settle; I stick to calmer waters.

## Kimbiji Changu

*Original Swahili text of "My Dinghy"*

Nastahabu kimbiji, kidau changu cha kwanza  
Kingawa mlejileji k'welea haikupanza  
Na kufa Ngozoa-Maji, yali usiku wa kiza  
Ndipo leo hakiwaza haangama Kazekea

Kiwinzo changu kiwinzo nilipo hikioleza  
Chalikuwa cha matezo nami ikinipumbaza,  
Hatusa nacho ufuzo mawimbi kutoa kweza,  
Ndipo leo hakiwaza haangama Kazekea

## The Donkey Breeder

A real herder breeds cattle, tugging on teats for dairy,  
Yielding butter in tubfuls to send for if I'm hungry,  
And fresh-cut meat I can sell, assuring my dignity.  
But breeding a lame donkey? All it does is fart at you.

Or buffalo you can breed, almost the same as heifers,  
With butter, fresh milk, and meat, and best of all, their antlers,  
Putting an end to our grief. I warn you, fellow creatures!  
Don't be a donkey breeder! All it does is fart at you.

If you want meat and income, a real shepherd keeps a goat.  
No reason to be frightened. Quit your job and stay afloat.  
Walk yourself out to its pen, have a feast and slit its throat.  
Breeding donkeys is a joke! All they do is fart at you.

## Mfuga Punda

*Original Swahili text of "The Donkey Breeder"*

Mfuga hufuga ng'ombe, k'ashika bubu k'akama;  
Na samli lembe-lembe k'iwa na haja k'atuma,  
Na nyama t'inde nisumbe, niwe katika hishima.  
Mfuga-p'unda-kilema, hukujambia mashuzi!

Mfuga hufuga nyati mshabaha kama ng'ombe;  
Samli na ziwa witi na nyama, na juu p'embe.  
Majuto kwisha laiti tahadharini viumbe!Mfuga  
punda si zumbel hukujambia mashuzi.

Mfuga hufuga mbuzi nyama mwenyi madihala  
Ukawata yako kazi wala pasiwe na ila: Ukenda  
katika zizi kumtinda na kumla Mfuga-p'unda,  
madhilla! hukujambia mashuzi

## **Introduction to the Poetry of María Concepción Bautista Vázquez**

María Concepción Bautista Vázquez is one of the indigenous writers in Chiapas, Mexico who publish both in their native languages, in this case Maya-Tsotsil, and in Spanish. She believes that presenting languages together helps universalize language and open up textual possibilities. While translation always raises questions of how to convey ideas across linguistic boundaries, this self-translation can also highlight different worldviews within the same writer. For example, “Skëjimol ch’ulelaltik” contains the Tsotsil word ch’ulel, which is sometimes, as here, translated as alma or soul; but ch’ulel has significant differences from the European concept, one of which is that non-human beings and aspects of the physical world may have them as well, as the poem suggests. Including the language of this Maya consciousness helps place Tsotsil in dialogue with other languages and conceptions of the world, not limited to a single context but focused in a universal way.

MARÍA CONCEPCIÓN BAUTISTA VÁZQUEZ

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Translated by Sean Sell

**Jxanbilun**

Chi xanab ta bik'it sbelal kuxlejal,  
chi sta li lajele  
ta slajeb sbelal jkuxlejal,  
xojobalun te jlajeletik.  
Li sakil xik' k'ak'ale  
xchi'in li jch'ulele.  
Jxanbilun ta sbatel osil k'ak'al.

## Soy viajera

Transito el estrecho camino del destino,  
la muerte me alcanza  
en el último trecho de vida,  
luminosidad entre los mortales.  
Las blancas alas del día  
acompañan mi espíritu.  
Soy viajera en el tiempo.

## **I am a traveler**

Making my way down destiny's narrow path,  
death encounters me  
in the final stretch of life,  
luminous among the mortals.  
The white wings of day  
accompany my spirit.  
I am a traveler in time.



## Ch'anal osilk'ak'al

Xpokat ta k'obaletik li jbek'tale,  
mul yanal te' xchi'uk nichim schi'inik jch'ulel.

Xchi'uk sk'unil k'ob li jtijvobe'  
tsots stijbe sk'inal ti xchi'enale,  
ch'ulel lajelal smala xbat  
ta xch'ut ch'anal osil kak'al.

## Callado tiempo

Manos purifican mi cuerpo,  
aroma a laurel y flores acompaña mi esencia.

El tamborero con sus suaves caricias  
hace vibrar la música del sepulcro,  
alma fúnebre espera marcharse  
en el vientre del callado tiempo.

## Quiet time

Hands purify my body.

The aroma of laurel and flowers guides my essence.

The drummer's soft caresses  
vibrate musically in the sepulchre,  
funereal soul waiting to march  
in the belly of quiet time.

## K'unyaman vinajel

Skejoj som osilot ta sakil osil.  
Xyamet ak'ubalot batel-osil.  
Ya'lелotsat jch'ulme'tik, xmukul ya'lелvinajel.  
Kapalot ta ch'ubilkop,  
ta k'unil lo'il ak'ubal.  
Ta k'unyaman vinajel, muilyutsil pom.

## Tibio cielo

Eres canto de aurora en la blanca luz del día.

Eres tenue noche eterna.

Eres llanto de luna, murmullo de lluvia.

Entre las plegarias te envuelves,

en el susurro de la noche.

En el tibio cielo, aroma de copal.

## Misty sky

You are the dawn-song in the white light of day.  
The dimness of eternal night.  
The music of the moon, the murmur of rain.  
Within the prayers you enshroud yourself,  
in the whispers of the warm night.  
In the misty sky, aroma of incense.

## Sk'ejimol ch'ulelaltik

Oyik te k'in . . .

Ta sk'ejoj vobtik

ch'ulelaltik

xk'ejinik xchi'uk ya'lelvinajel,

xchi'uk k'ak'al,

xchi'uk jme'tik u.

Nichimal noyempre

St'ujumtas xch'enal mukenaltik.

Li ch'ulelaltike oyik ta k'in,

sk'ejimol ch'ulelaltik

chaik li vitsike.

## El canto de las almas

Están de fiesta . . .

Al canto de los tambores

las almas

cantan con la lluvia,

con el sol,

con la madre luna.

Flor de noviembre

adorna los sepulcros.

Las almas están de fiesta,

el canto de las almas

las montañas escuchan.



## The song of the souls

They are here at the fiesta . . .  
To the sound of the drums  
the souls sing  
with the rain,  
with the sun,  
with the mother moon.  
Flower of November  
    adorns the graves.  
The souls are here at the fiesta,  
the song of the souls  
    and the mountains are listening.

## Jk'opon

K'alal ta lajel  
jk'opon balmil yu'un chiyak'  
ochkun ta xch'ut.

K'alal ta lajel  
jk'opon k'ak'al yu'un sakumtas li jsaklikan sat  
jujun k'ak'al.

K'alal ta lajel  
jk'opon sakubel osil xchi'uk stsujulal  
yu'un sikumtas konton.

K'alal ta lajel  
jk'opon jme'tik u yu'un xchinun jujun ak'bal.

Aech ta jk'opon sikil ik' yu'un  
sjaxbun jsat jujun ik'liman.

## Saludo

Al morir  
debo saludar a la tierra por permitirme  
entrar en su regazo.

Al morir  
debo saludar al sol por iluminar mi rostro pálido  
cada día.

Al morir  
saludo al amanecer con su fresco rocío  
por mitigar mi sed.

Al morir  
he de saludar a la luna por acompañarme cada noche.

Y así he de saludar al fresco viento  
Que acaricia mi rostro cada mañana.

## Salute

At death

I owe a salute to the earth for allowing me  
to enter into her bosom.

At death

I owe a salute to the sun for illuminating my pallid face  
every day.

At death

I salute the dawn with its cool mist  
that quenches my thirst.

At death

I must salute the moon for being with me every night.

And the fresh wind

that every morning caresses my face.

JUDITA ŠALGO

Translated by John K. Cox

## What I Wrote About

I sit in a bookstore that's overwhelmed with books: newspapers fall over each other in waterfalls all around the place, and above them floats dust like haze. There is a foam of white paper everywhere, rustling, crackling, the clap of page on page. Through the great windows the sun delivers warmth like in a hothouse. Here, I tell myself, from this profusion of clammy, nutrient-rich paper my first novel is going to hatch. My first, rudimentary, single-celled novel.<sup>1</sup>

For several years I worked in a bookstore that, indeed, on hot summer days was a veritable greenhouse, humid, full of heavy vapors. It looked like the books were going to germinate all of a sudden, as though out of the fattened bindings would grow new pages and the multitude of books would go on and on, right before my eyes, reproducing uncontrollably. And I started to write, probably precisely out of fear of that abundance.

And thus, out of my paper Garden of Eden issued forth my first literary figures into the world. First of all an anonymous driver, a random creature who, literally, alighted from the pages of the maintenance manual for a car known as the Zastava 101; then, from the heap of paper, like a bubble of thick soap, the figure of a small book thief stole away, a character who—pale, papery like the goods from which he lives, and likely afraid of being returned almost instantly to the place from which he had come, to paper—tries with all of his might to assert himself as a literary character.

The unnamed driver and the book thief are probationary characters in the novel. Destined to be “unreal” and “fictive,” they need to give the impression of a certain lightness, of a soothing casualness and ambiguity, which in turn is supposed to lure, to introduce into the novel those “true” characters in whose reality people can and must believe, in spite of everything, till the last moment, until the opposite proves to be true. Well, and after that, too—especially after!

<sup>1</sup> The novel in question is *Trag kočenja* (1987), Šalgo's first. The author was already a highly regarded experimental poet by the time she wrote her three novels, two of which were published posthumously. The most famous of these, *Put u Birobidžan*, has appeared in English as *The Road to Birobidžan*, translated by John K. Cox (Frankfurt am Main: CEEOL Press, 2021).

These “real” characters are, principally: my father, A. Manhajm<sup>2</sup> who, suddenly grown uneasy at an advanced age (did I upset him by pulling him into my unnatural story?), clears out of his house and holes up in a homely little broom closet at a friend’s place, with the two of them day-dreaming about the shared love of their youth—Einstein, and the endless territories of the theory of relativity; and then, my sister, a fifty-year-old, twice-divorced woman who after a life spent in fear of pregnancy and of life itself, suddenly (again suddenly!) “escapes” into pregnancy, a belated, pre-menopausal pregnancy from which, apparently, she will never liberate herself.

I write out of a need for justice. In order to create someone to whom it was not granted to be born, or to extend the lives of people taken before their time.

It would seem that, with this rhetorical affidavit, I (author, daughter, sister, etc.) am attempting to justify the nefarious idea of placing two human beings, already dead for almost four and a half decades, two souls who perished on the biggest killing fields of the Second World War, in the center of a novel that’s occurring now: that I should describe not (only) what they were like in their lifetimes, or even when they were at death’s door, but what they might now be like, in a kind of “life after life,” a spectral, equivocal literary existence illuminated by the light of both day and night, of sun and moon.

The novel does not cancel death, not even conditionally, but it does allow for the possibility that death, at least for a moment, can somehow be overlooked, ignored, that it can simply be transcended. Crossed over? But to what?

Pressed on all sides by *reality*, people have great trouble capturing for themselves a small, well-guarded preserve of the unreal. In a world of inexhaustible *realistic* possibilities, in which reality and existence are the basic measures of things, the artist surrenders—what else?—to ever more substantial and narcotic doses of creative nonexistence.

“That’s all well and good,” says the reader, scanning this ‘abstract,’ “but what’s your novel about?”

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<sup>2</sup> Šalgo’s father, Sándor (Aleksandar) Manhajm, was interned by the pro-Axis government of Hungary during World War II, and he was sent to the Eastern Front as a slave laborer, where he was killed in late 1942. Šalgo’s mother, Jelisaveta Manhajm, née Abraham, survived imprisonment at Bergen-Belsen, returned to Novi Sad in Yugoslavia after the war, and eventually remarried.

I'm not certain that I could ever say what I wrote about. First, I would like to tell you what I didn't write about. It seems to me:

that I didn't write about myself (although while writing the novel I actually did sometimes think about myself);

that I also did not write about other people, my loved ones, either (although at times I did, thinking about myself, in fact yearn for my loved ones);

that I also didn't write about things (although I did, yearning for my relatives, get acquainted with some far-away things);

that I likewise did not write either about any real events (although I did, coming to know some far-off things, set in motion some real events, too) . . .

The number of things about which I did not write is legion. Furthermore, I also did not write:

about the Battle of Kursk in 1942,

about the secret Treaty of London of 1915,

about the Boston Massacre of 1770,

about the St. Bartholomew Day's Massacre of 1572,

about the Seljuks losing their eastern empire in 1157,

about Leif Erikson reaching America sometime after 1000,

about the death of King David in 961,

about the fall of Nineveh in 612,

about the unification of Lower and Upper Egypt in 2850.

\*THE END\*

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