



**Volume 9, no. 2, May 2017**

**Complete poetry and poetry in translation**

**Poetry**

Steve Brock	Portrait of my Wife's 114 Year-old Great Grandfather
Marcelle Freiman	Country of my Birth – lines written 27 June 2013
Shari Kocher	As We Spiral Pine Tree Mountain
Debasish Lahiri	And Still
Robyn Rowland	Strung
Jena Woodhouse	A Morning Stroll to Derwentwater, through the Fields

**Poetry in translation**

Episode: Phaedrus (247c6-8) by Yorgos Kentrotis, translated and introduced by Paschalis Nikolaou

The First Day's Sun by Rabindranath Tagore, translated by Reza Haq

Complete articles.

Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 2, May 2017.

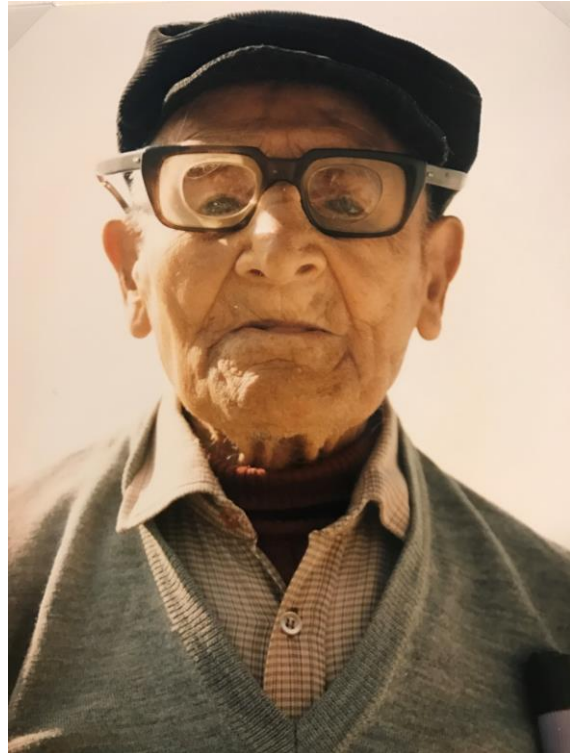
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## Portrait of my Wife's 114 Year-old Great Grandfather

he raised the twisted fingers  
of his right hand  
to his forehead  
where they rested  
beneath the brim  
of a black beret

he stared at us  
through the fog and shadows  
of the past century  
his eye balls pushing  
against the yellow glass  
of black-framed spectacles  
that rode the wrinkled  
sun-spotted flesh  
above his ears

the left hand  
assumed its cupped position  
behind his good ear  
while his shrunken lips  
opened and closed  
mimicking conversation  
and occasionally revealing  
a single, rotted tooth  
jutting forth  
from the bottom gum



*Alberto Quiñones Saavedra*

Steve Brock. 'Portrait of my Wife's 114 Year-old Great Grandfather'.  
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<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

breaking his silence  
on occasion  
with a sudden  
high-pitched  
*gracias mi hija!*  
for a cup of tea  
or some food  
or whatever it was  
his elderly daughter  
placed before him

***Steve Brock***

**Country of my Birth – lines written 27 June 2013**

*'I do not live in the past, the past lives in me.'*<sup>1</sup>

1.

Today Nelson Mandela is ailing

in a Pretoria hospital

in the land I fled in 1977

anxious as a *Duiker*.

How did I love (hate) a country

where I knew so much silence?

In blank surfaces of days

did not hear

his voice

his fugitive life, the Boksburg strikes

(where my grandparents lived) of May 1961

his words that rang across

the courtroom of his truth

in 1962

were Treason in the *Sunday Times*

whispers

overheard at home – of 'Rivonia'

names splintered the night

my father at the table with a whisky: something

about Braam Fischer – Dad knew of his arrest.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on words by Olga Horak, Sydney Jewish Museum.

I was thirteen in 1964  
skinny, growing  
knew nothing  
of the people's words  
from rooftops, stations, sidings  
factories  
my ears were stoppered:  
then whispers would turn to more –  
bold teacher taught high-school girls our history  
while censors rained fear on us –

seven years later in 1971 at nineteen, truth would out  
white protests, students:

the blue-uniformed policeman  
brown leather holster revolvered  
me in revolving door  
between action and  
fear –  
snatched from  
my hands the Roneo leaflets  
black ink still damp  
stains on my fingers.

But we marched our placards down Commissioner Street  
law student boyfriend protective: 'If the cops come, run'  
and we ran –  
then  
heard of leaders, writers, slipped in showers they said  
in John Vorster Square

or fell from windows  
brothers, students arrested at university gates  
    were released on the Vice-Chancellor's plea, police  
    promises not to record 'crimes' of protest  
                    were betrayed  
                    we later discovered –

and all white boys had to do their time, army conscripts  
at eighteen to fight for  
    on behalf of  
    apartheid

2.

All those intractable years 1963 to 1982  
    Mandela in prison  
        the white dust of Robben Island's  
            quarries  
                in his lungs  
    he knew he was right  
    held to what was  
        right:

the country made him wrong  
    the years took his freedom, he lived on  
    black prisoner's meagre diet, with hard labour.

The country took so many  
held them servile,  
cut back and low

like young trees –

myth of Bantu Education, the Pass Laws

refusing residence

land

family –

until the people could not count

what was stolen

each day toiling down

mines, in factories –

(Can childhood draw blame?)

I had no language

for the lost –

we lived in white houses of difference

and if my father could bribe the

Pass Office

bureaucrat

for Albert our gardener from Mozambique

to stay

to work

make our garden grow with flowers

spread topsoil on our green lawn and

not be deported, despite having no Pass –

a drop in an ocean

his kindness –

my father

worked the system

and kept it quiet – the whispered names

the safe houses of the 1960s

for friends in banished parties  
African National Congress, South African Communist Party –

nobody talking:  
the stories have gone with my father  
to Johannesburg's West Park Cemetery.

A country of tawny winter grass  
and dust blowing from mine dumps  
dry eucalyptus trees along  
a road  
where ragged workers  
tramped after fourteen-hour days

where difference meant gunshots in  
the backs of schoolchildren  
in Soweto June 1976  
and more strikes that stopped everything  
so much (hope and) fear, it tasted bitter –

and the men who spoke truth  
still sat on bunks in prison cells  
made plans for their future country  
wrote on scraps of paper.

3.

I am born of a country of misery, its  
scales tipped wildly  
for too many years –

from its ashes and punctured oil-drum heaters



from fingerless gloves in Highveld  
    winter frost at dawn  
from languages I never learned  
    my brain bleached with difference –

to the hills of Xhosaland in the Transkei  
    from which ascended this bird of hope  
        and then forgiveness  
(how could this happen?)  
    his presence  
    a burning star in a country gone wrong  
    where ash and plastic still litter township streets  
    Diepsloot, Alexandria –  
    the harshness goes on, he is loved:

no electricity in concrete rooms  
candles flicker in the night.

***Marcelle Freiman***

## As We Spiral Pine Tree Mountain

What small herbs of ice and wind  
are carried, glinting, seven spirals  
through a ring, this skin-tingling  
shiver-flickering ruckus of imported  
scent upon us, this space between

our bodies and our shadows  
soft-footed in needles three feet deep?  
I confess I've watched you turn,  
out walking, to check how far behind  
I've fallen, and if too much, fling

yourself to ground, coming home to this:  
this here home country, despite the foreign  
trees whose roots are tangled, like yours  
in mine, dropping down beside you  
in full sweat, the bed of your smile

so worth it, out of breath, that I could lie  
here forever pouring the mountain  
through the pine, not once, but many times  
these past weeks, following the Bogong  
moth, and this—this untranslatable rush

of heat sparked by your hand in mine,  
which shoots the bird in me straight  
up through the roar of history, that trap-  
door floor a canopy unhinging  
the sky in us as we fall, and fall,

and rise in flood as sap inside a tree.

***Shari Kocher***

Shari Kocher. 'As We Spiral Pine Tree Mountain'.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol.9 no.2, May 2017.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

## And Still

And still  
 The swallows have taken their shadows south  
 And the geese  
 Arriving  
 Keep calling, and calling  
 As though witness  
 To a fresh parting.  
 Now  
 The months return to this day  
 Of promise  
 When you cling  
 To feeble 'ever and ever'  
 Like the wreck  
 Of some great ship  
 That will,  
 You hope,  
 Keep you afloat.

Perhaps,  
 Even today,  
 Old wine shall ease worry  
 And the chrysanthemum bush  
 Keep me from the ruins of age.  
 But  
 What if you live  
 In the dry bramble tenement  
 Of the moment,  
 Helpless,  
 As the wind in season  
 Takes umbrage  
 To your wall  
 Of small silence?

Shall I sing to myself today?  
 Idleness would then have a sound.  
 Perhaps  
 I will give memories  
 That I have made  
 But not had  
 Their time.  
 Perhaps,

Debasish Lahiri. 'And Still'.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol.9 no.2, May 2017.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

I will take my time today.

Seeing off the year's final day, --  
This worm-hole winter,  
Cold pimples on the skin of warmth, --  
Could be a very long waving.  
If I write  
Words will break off in sentences.  
I want things to stand fast.  
So much eludes me today  
That I will meet them all  
Today  
And do  
Nothing.

*Debasish Lahiri*

## Strung

*'My weapon was my cello' Vedran Smajlović (1956 - ) during the Siege of Sarajevo (1992-1996)*

Neck & belly, ribs, waist & tailpiece,  
the cello's body is a swoon in timber.  
The bridge transporting, the spike stabilising.  
How varied the ends these shapes serve.  
Four strings only, once made of gut.

War used to need the slim connection of strings.  
Dipped cotton thread of the first fuses  
slowing down the blast of gunpowder –  
naive, basic, effective. Now spikes detonate,  
or the mere pressure of a hand.

Incas recorded their stories in string,  
knots in them a language only the trained could interpret.  
Twisted fibres connected correctly created boats,  
bridges over ravines leading to safety, survival.  
Threads drew maps through religion, land, community.

Lines are curious things. Drawn across a face,  
along a road, through a history.  
It took me days, but I found you, everywhere,  
not just at one time in one place, but at fuse-points, pinpoints,  
tracing a map through Sarajevo's agony for two years.

Orange plastic chair or burnt stool, you appear at burned-out trains,  
on railway tracks, the bombed station, half-husk of the National Library,  
the pavement before a flower-bed of tributes. You had played sixteen years  
for the Sarajevo Opera, Theatre, Philharmonic – now for two years  
a solo every day, one mellow moment in war's percussive madness.

You never grow used to neck, ribs, waist, strung across the road,  
bodies blown apart, twenty-two of your neighbours queuing for bread,  
children in the school, the marketplace, playing ball,  
a scattering of gut, the strings of tendon & nerve splayed. Your fingers  
bind those left together in grief, in the fragile beauty of music.

In Lion Cemetery where twenty-one people were killed &  
seventy wounded during funerals – easy pickings in daylight –  
you balance on uneven ground between piles of dirt.

Robyn Rowland. 'Strung'.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol.10 no.2, May 2017.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Impeccable in evening dress, white shirt, bow-tie, walrus moustache,  
crimson cello rests along the contours of your body, becoming thinner.

Igor Malsević, eight, beside you, Svetko Mandić, seventy-two,  
born the same year as my father, Zoran Kozomara, nineteen,  
near the age of my son, names freshly carved into grave-markers,  
their final year the same – 1992. And later, you play in the dark, in  
newer graveyards – the whole soccer stadium & every park in the city full.

In the National Library ruins, posing for the Winter Festival poster, 1993  
your hand hides your eyes from a world too ignorant, too preoccupied,  
strings weeping the Adagio of sadness.  
Yet no-one comes to lift the siege. Joan Baez stands beside you.  
Nearly two years & still no-one comes.

Annie Leibovitz sees a mortar rip out the back of a teenage boy  
on a bicycle. Rushing to the hospital, he dies on the way.  
Her photograph, *Bloody Bicycle*, is shocking in black & white,  
its skid of blood a question mark in Vanity Fair. Still. No-one comes.  
Susan Sontag spends six months directing *Waiting for Godot*. Waiting.

How often do you play Albinoni in C minor? Soulful strings  
strike deep, entering the heart slowly, in the piece Giazotto  
built out of fine black ink-lines, their knotted heads crying out  
from a burned fragment left behind in bomb-soaked Dresden.  
War the link, loss the connection.

In *Sniper alley*, men in the hills make civilian death random.  
Seated in this major thoroughfare turned shooting-gallery, bee-yellow  
the blasted Holiday Inn behind you is refuge to world media  
in the basement. The body of the cello curves into your arms.  
Four strings & your crimson cello weeping. You play on.

From *Sharp Vigilance* to *Deliberate Force*<sup>\*</sup> – two years more  
before help comes. By then, 10,000 dead in this city of Winter Olympics  
& you, far away on a border between past and present, play chess  
not cello, watching the rippling waters of Carlingford Lough in Ireland  
free at last from the daily grind of courage.

**Robyn Rowland**

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<sup>\*</sup> NATO: *Operation Sharp Vigilance* ( 1992) to *Operation Deliberate Force* (August/September 1995)

## A Morning Stroll to Derwentwater, through the Fields

Old gods of stone and light stand obdurate at Castlerigg;  
trees naked as penitents await the signal flare of canopies;  
stoic ewes with lambs at foot watch strangers with a wary eye;  
young rabbits play hide-and-seek among the sandstone tombs.

Derwentwater shimmers with the images of violet crests,  
the auburn bracken on their flanks, last year's heather  
dark as peat; a red hound bounds about our feet,  
eager to retrieve a stick. What did the Norsemen think,

before their axes felled the trees? Did they wonder if  
the fly agaric was deceiving them, making them hallucinate  
this glimpse of paradise? I sense that I've been here before,  
and that I shall return. I take a sliver of green slate,  
leave a lucky coin.

*Jena Woodhouse*

## Episode: *Phaedrus* (247c6-8)

Yorgos Kentrotis (1958 –)

Translated and introduced by Paschalis Nikolaou

Yorgos Kentrotis was born in 1958 in Laconia, the Peloponnese. Following studies in Law at Greek and German universities, he was eventually won over by literature and translation. He is currently Professor in Translation Theory at the Ionian University in Corfu. Since the early 1980s he has steadily produced translations from ancient Greek, Latin, German and Russian—of works by, among others, Plato, Cicero, Robert Musil, Pablo Neruda, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Bertolt Brecht. His essays and monographs on comparative literature, poetics and translation are widely recognized. A first collection of his poems appeared in 2006; Kentrotis has published five collections since. In 2014, he put out a collection of no less than 500 of Brecht's poems in Greek translation, as well as a selection of epigrams from the *Palatine Anthology*. A similar edition of Paz's poetry is forthcoming. Most recently in 2015, he published the long-awaited Greek translation of Giambattista Vico's (1668–1744) *La Scienza Nuova* (1725).

\* \* \*

You witnessed it, then: silence taking flight:  
Trembling; unsteady  
    less than certain,  
    lost.

*Thank you, . . . Sir . . .*  
she said  
—she must have seen you were a foreigner—  
an awkward smile on her face  
as those long pearly-white fingers slid  
    all of them at once  
through the palm you'd offered  
so that she could get up  
    after slipping on  
        the crystallized snow  
outside that rosy-brown granite building;  
the rectangle of a Nordea bank.

Let her remain colourless  
let her remain formless  
let her stay impalpable  
    —and untouched, intact . . .

Let the soul's *essence*  
shrivel or swell to its content,  
you witnessed it, even so,  
through the eyes of *nous*; the soul's pilot.

'Episode: *Phaedrus* (247c6-8)' by Yorgos Kentrotis. Translated by Paschalis Nikolaou.  
Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 2, May 2017.  
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*Exactly as* you recognized the flight of silence here,  
as one trembling,  
                    unsteady,  
                            losing the wings—  
the wings of your own soul.

*Merci beaucoup, Monsieur!*—she then said  
—in the end she thought you must be French  
or someone from the South, and so probably knew the language—  
and by now she wasn't awkward at all.  
It was your own wavering silence  
that was left dancing, gracelessly,  
right there on her long, slim lily-white  
  fingers  
while you were still trying to remember . . .  
—you had seen somewhere, in a dictionary,  
and had learned  
                                    (for future use . . .  
                                    you never know!)—  
how to say *You're welcome*  
                                    in Finnish.  
But the day for *that* judgment had not arrived,  
so in the end you simply mumbled  
one abject '*Tipota*'  
which of course, meant to her, absolutely *nothing*;  
beyond the incomprehensible din of its three syllables  
already half-chewed by you.

\* \* \*

### ΕΠΕΙΣΟΔΙΟ: ΠΛΑΤΩΝΟΣ ΦΑΙΔΡΟΣ, 247c6-8

Το πέταγμα της σιωπής το είδες:  
ασταθές·  
                    αβέβαιο·  
                            χαμένο.

*Thank you, . . . Sir . . .*  
—πρόσεξε ή αναγνώρισε ότι είσαι ξένος—  
σου είπε  
χαμογελώντας αμήχανα κάπως,  
καθώς γλιστρούσανε τα δάχτυλά της,  
όλα μαζί  
                    —πέρλες μακρόστενες πέντε—  
μεσ' απ' το χέρι  
που της είχες δώσει

να σηκωθεί  
από το γλίστρημα  
στο κρουσταλλιασμένο χιόνι  
έξω απ' το γρανίτινο κτίριο,  
το επιβλητικά φαιορόδινο και τετράγωνο  
της Nordea.

Ας είναι αχρώματη·  
ας είν' ασχημάτιστη·  
ας είναι αναφής . . .  
—ανέγγιχτη, άπιαστη . . .

Ας είναι ό,τι θέλει α- και αν- και *μη* και *όχι*  
η ουσία της ψυχής  
—εσύ τη βλέπεις παρά ταύτα—  
με τα μάτια του κυβερνήτη νου.  
*Ε τ σ ι* είδες και το πέταγμα της σιωπής:  
ένα ασταθές,  
αβέβαιο,  
χαμένο φτερούγισμα  
ένα φτερούγισμα της ψυχής  
σου . . .

*Merci beaucoup, Monsieur!*  
—νόμισε τελικά πως είσαι γάλλος η νότιος  
και ξέρεις ή καταλαβαίνεις γαλλικά—  
σου είπε έπειτα  
και δεν είχε πια καμμιάν αμηχανία απολύτως.  
Στα κρινοδάχτυλά της τα περλένια  
εχόρευε αμήχανη εσένα μόνο  
η διχόρροπη σιωπή σου,  
καθώς ακόμα έψαχνες να βρεις . . .  
να θυμηθείς . . .

—το είχες δει στο λεξικό  
και το 'χες μάθει  
(έτσι . . .  
δια πάσαν χρήσιν . . .  
ποτέ δεν ξέρεις!)

πως λένε *You 'rewelcome*  
στα φιλλανδικά.

Μα η ώρα της Χρήσεως επέστη,  
κι εσύ τότε επέλλισες εν τέλει  
ένα χαμένο *Τίποτα*  
που δεν της είπε τίποτα,  
εξόν, βεβαίως, τον ακατανόητο στ' αφτιά της  
και μισομασημένο από σένα τρισύλλαβο ήχο του.

## The First Day's Sun

Rabindranath Tagore  
Translated by Reza Haq

The first day's sun  
had asked  
on the arrival of the new self:  
who are you?  
There was no answer.

Years went by one after another.  
The day's last sun  
asked the last question  
by the western shore  
on a quiet evening:  
who are you?  
No answer came.

\* \* \*

## প্রথম দিনের সূর্য

প্রথম দিনের সূর্য  
প্রশ্ন করেছিল  
সত্তার নূতন আবির্ভাবে –  
কে তুমি?  
মেলে নি উত্তর।

বৎসর বৎসর চলে গেল।  
দিবসের শেষ সূর্য  
শেষ প্রশ্ন উচ্চারিল  
পশ্চিম সাগর তীরে  
নিঃস্বল্প সন্ধ্যায় –  
কে তুমি?  
পেল না উত্তর।