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Poetry in translation

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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

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.’†

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.

† Based on words by Olga Horak, Sydney Jewish Museum.

Marcelle Freiman, ‘Country of my Birth – lines written 27 June 2013’.
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 revolwered
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

Marcelle Freiman, ‘Country of my Birth – lines written 27 June 2013’.
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

Marcelle Freiman, ‘Country of my Birth – lines written 27 June 2013’. 
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'.
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’.
I will take my time today.

Seeing off the year’s final day, --
This worm-hole winter,
Cold pimplces 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 
asolo 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’. 
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 seige. 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 cell o curves into your arms.
Four strings & your crimson cello weeping. You play on.

From Sharp Vigilance to Deliberate Force – 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

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
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
shrive or swell to its content,
you witnessed it, even so,
through the eyes of nous; the soul’s pilot.

* * *
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
και να αναρτηθεί
εξω απ’ το γλίστρημα
στο κρουσταλλιασμένο χιόνι
έξω απ’ το γρανίτινο κτίριο,
το επιβλητικό 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 μή και όχι
η ουσία της ψυχής
–εσό τη βλέπεις παρά ταύτα–
με τα μάτια του κυβερνήτη σου.
Ε τ σ ι είδες και το πέταγμα της σωπής:
ένα ασταθές,
αβέβαιο,
χαμένο φτερούγισμα
ένα φτερούγισμα της ψυχής
σου . . .

Mercibeaucoup, Monsieur!
–νόμισε τελικά πως είσαι γάλλος η νότιος
και ξέρεις ή καταλαβαίνεις γαλλικά–
sou είπε έπειτα
και δεν είχε πια καμμιά απολύτως.
Στα κρινοδάχτυλά της τα περλένια
εξόρνευε αμηχανή εσένα μόνο
–η διχόρροπη σιωπή σου,
καθώς ακόμα ένας να βρεις . . .
–το είχες δει στο λεξικό
και το ’χες μάθει
(έτσι . . .
ποτέ δεν ξέρεις!–
pως λένε You’rewelcome
–να όμηθείς . . .

Μα η ώρα της Χρήσεως επέστη,
κι εσύ τότε ενέχλισες εν τέλει
ένα χαμένο Τίποτα
που δεν της είπες τίποτα,
εξόν, βεβαιώς, τον ακινητό στ’ αφτιά της
και μισομασημένο από σένα τρισύλλαβο ήχο του.

*Episode: Phaedrus (247c6-8)* by Yorgos Kentrotis. Translated by Paschalis Nikolaou.
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 প্রথম দিনের সূর্য প্রথম দিনের সূর্য প্রথম দিনের সূর্য

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প্রথম দিনের সূর্য

বৎসর বৎসর চলে গেল।

দিবসের শেষ সূর্য

শেষ প্রথম আবির্ভাব

পশ্চিম সাগর তীরে

লিন্যর সম্ভ্যায় –

কে তুমি?

(দেহ না উঠর।)