

ABSINTHE

WORLD LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

PRECARIOUS EUROPE

Writing in Uncertain Times

Edited by Etienne Charierre and Emily Goedde

21

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ABSINTHE : A Journal of World Literature in Translation

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ABSINTHE

*PRECARIOUS EUROPE :
WRITING IN UNCERTAIN TIMES*

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A selection by Etienne Charrière
in collaboration with Emily Goedde

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DEAR READERS,

Thank you for picking up this copy of *Absinthe*. This is the first issue to appear under the ægis of the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, which has agreed to publish *Absinthe* after Dwayne Hayes stepped down as editor-in-chief. We are deeply indebted to Dwayne's creativity, passion, and sheer determination in founding and maintaining *Absinthe* for ten years. And we are proud and excited to continue the tradition of bringing you some of the world's finest contemporary literature in English translation.

I hope you will enjoy reading this issue as much as we enjoyed producing it. Please let us know your thoughts—we can be reached at absinthe.complit@umich.edu.

In shared love of literature and literary translation,

SILKE-MARIA WEINECK

Editor-in-chief

Absinthe: A Journal of World Literature in Translation

Chair, Department of Comparative Literature

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FROM THE EDITORS

More than half a decade after the onset of the European sovereign debt crisis whose lingering effects are still acutely felt across the continent, there seems to have emerged a general sense that precariousness has—quite paradoxically—become a perennial component of the European experience. ‘In strange, mutilated times, [...] the only available register is one of defeat’ write the Galician poets **María do Cebreiro** and **Daniel Salgado** in one of their sharply meditative poems which open this new issue of *Absinthe*. As it painstakingly recovers—or not— from the crisis, is Europe really doomed to only produce a literature of mourning?

Precarious Europe : Writing in Uncertain Times makes no attempt at offering an exhaustive survey of the hypothetical genre of the ‘literature of the crisis’—or even at claiming that such a homogeneous category does, in fact, truly exist. For their first issue, the new editors of *Absinthe* wanted to bring together a number of contemporary voices, all speaking *to* and *from* this current stage of uncertainty, either in Europe’s ‘center’ or at its ‘margins’. Together, these singular perspectives compose the fragmentary and often somber picture of a continent in turmoil.

In the work of Greek author and photographer **Christos Chryssopoulos**, who keeps track of his nightly ramblings through a desolate Athens, the old figure of the flâneur is reactivated and assigned the task of documenting human survival among ruins old and new.

In a short story by **Gonçalo M. Tavares**, one of the most important figures in contemporary Portuguese literature, the malaise driven by widespread unemployment is reinforced by the brutal irruption of absurd and macabre elements in familiar middle-class settings.

Five pieces from the recent Spanish flash fiction anthology *Desahuciados: Crónicas de la Crisis* highlight the importance of collective creative responses to the crisis, as well as the ways in which the feeling of urgency that characterizes the times can be conveyed in short-form prose.

Sonic and visual experimentation are at the core of poet and performer **Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl’s** pieces, translated by the author from the original Icelandic.

Written in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Iceland's economy, the poems gathered here envision crisis as an almost literal explosion from which can only emerge a poetics of stuttering, a new broken language violently humorous and hallucinatory.

Turning the sanitized language of global communication into a playful and deceptive poetic idiom, German poet **Katharina Schultens** invokes ancient and modern myths in her exploration of contemporary job insecurity.

In his short story, **Bruce Bégout** adopts the perspective of a modern pariah, the undocumented immigrant, whose soliloquy reveals with the driest irony the gloomy underside of the French city.

Staging with an almost Beckettian tone the gradual disintegration of his central character, Croatian author **Marko Pogačar** returns to *Absinthe* with a brilliantly dark short story which seems to be set among the debris of a world annihilated by an unnamed crisis.

Finally, we close with a melancholy dispatch from Europe's contested border, in the work of **Taras Fedirko** who keeps a poetic journal of Ukraine's troubled present.

'We are brought to this; that is / here to the eye of the storm, to the sodden ash / of history, to life, / its imperfect places' write **María do Cebreiro** and **Daniel Salgado**. Although *Absinthe* has moved to the best of homes in Ann Arbor, at the University of Michigan, a lot of the editorial work for this issue—as well as the entire redesign of the magazine's visual identity—took place in the city of Detroit, a space where the verses of the two Galician poets seem to find a particularly strong echo. Throughout the curatorial process, as we were reading and collecting texts about the crisis from all over Europe, it became difficult to not hear a lot of them vibrantly resonate with the urban landscape that surrounded us. In this space, just like in the texts gathered here, we read at once all the tensions and all the possibilities borne out of uncertainty and precariousness.

MARÍA DO CEBREIRO

✂ DANIEL SALGADO [GALICIA]

Poems from

The War A guerra

2013

Translated by Neil Anderson

In war there is nothing one cannot get used to.

The newspapers talked about war and didn't call it war.

They counted the dead but said nothing of death.

In strange, mutilated times, in times
made of husks, of bits left behind by another century,
against light and against lion tactics,
we are brought to this; that is,
here to the eye of the storm, to the sodden ash
of history, to life,
its imperfect places;
life, anti-geometric yet heroic,
corrupt and scarce, concrete and kingless
where someone wonders, 'què volen aquesta gent
que truquen de matinada?'¹
and the animals are dead and yet
they speak, they denounce nomadic truths
as unworkable and prefer
to scrape down into the dank soil of this graceless
land, to proclaim the insurgency even though
the only available register is one of
defeat and the heavy burden of living flesh,
hand in hand with
uncertainty, that moment when what's happening
opens up and we find ourselves contrary to forest structures,
to nostalgia for childhood, and even to the mistaken transparency
of literature; like this: without a firm stance,
without any hard, broken notion that might make our situation clearer.

¹ 'What do they want, those people who come knocking at dawn?' Catalan lyrics from a 1968 antifrancoist song by María del Mar Bonet, based on a poem by Lluís Serrahima

We are traitors and, as such, we are witnesses.

In war, being astute is more important than being brave.

We are soldiers no more.

Will they read our letters?

JUAN ANTONIO MASOLIVER RÓDENAS [SPAIN]

‘Villa Intempérie’

From the flash fiction anthology *Desahuciados. Crónicas de la Crisis*

2013

Translated by Megan Berkobien

At dusk a group of armed men, like those from earlier that morning, ordered us to leave the house at once. We dragged the bed behind us as we left and, upon reaching a vacant lot, we settled there, in a house without walls, doors, and windows, roofless, too: what we came to call Villa Intemperie. In the middle of the night my two brothers, both policemen, arrived and told us to move on. A housing block would soon be built. We took to the road again, toward the horizon, when suddenly Nadia began to cry; during one of those evictions, she couldn't remember which, Nadia had forgotten her keys.

CHRISTOS CHRYSSOPOULOS [GREECE]

Excerpts from

A Light in the Mouth Φακός στο στόμα

2012

Translated by Will Stroebe

I have to mention that on a damp evening in December, by now I can't say for certain the hour, as the desire for a walk gripped me I abandoned the room where I'd been attempting to write, a room of ghosts, hastily descending the stairs to step out into a world that seemed no less cold or foreboding than the mood that followed in the wake of my first footsteps.

There are streets in every city. But whereas elsewhere they are made up of sidewalks, rows of houses and the lightly curved surfaces of the asphalt, the roads here refuse to be broken down into discrete elements. No matter their name, they seem the metaphors of the same insufferable, maddening abandonment, which levels everything to the ground.

I could add that as soon as I stepped out of the building I met a woman whose nerves were on edge, with that sleek skin and the chocolate tinge that those of mixed race usually have. She was looking somewhere vaguely towards the depth of the road and shouting over and over '*Eva! Eva!...*' At regular intervals, with a powerful voice and unchanging tone that gave one the impression that she herself was not entirely there. As if her existence had contracted inside her and there remained now her voice alone to slavishly repeat the same single-word sentence. You couldn't tell whether it was an exclamation or a statement. Whether she was shouting to some Eva in the distance or her affirmative tone was instead suggesting: '*I'm Eva! I'm Eva!*'

I glanced at her briefly. Her eyes were motionless. So I passed her and continued in the opposite direction, because I didn't want that monotonous cry trailing me along my walk.

In Athens there are scatterings of ghosts that gaze at you with fear. From where do they arise, these frozen glances? Where did they come from? Why did they gather here in the city? Was there ever, in another age, such a dire need to search for one's relief in the cracks and fissures of this unceasing reality? Why now, this litany of ghosts?

The wanderings of the silent in the roads, in buildings and stations, their presence and observation leave no marks on life's surface. The only thing that remains is the sight of their expressionless faces.

Direct contact with these ghosts—with what lies in the great beyond—resituates life where before was only a thoughtless headline. The shadow-like existences that we avoid on the streets, turning our face or changing the direction of our walk, hint at what we are not. They remind us that here exists 'another.' And, ultimately, they teach us to live in caution, believing that anyone might replace any of us. Every step jars our ontological foundations. Every wall is a cry built of words. The walls have mouths.

From what I remember now, as I write all of this, when I stepped out into the open street, I was in a somewhat foul and angry mood. The evening city that lay before me seemed different, as if I were seeing it for the first time. Or rather, no, that's wrong. The city didn't seem foreign. I could easily recognize the spots that I'd always recognized so well. And yet, something seemed wrong. As if something had gone bad of late, broken down, ever so slightly. In the same way that engines break down—but before they stop working for good, something goes wrong, some sound goes astray or their rhythm suddenly slows.

Whatever I came upon seemed invisibly threatening. Even the inanimate objects, like the garbage in the streets, the broken stone slabs and the myriad iron columns shoved into the sidewalks.

I quickly forgot that just a few moments earlier in my room I was torturing myself over a white sheet. Every desire I had for recording, every hope I had for representing this pessimistic malaise had evaporated.

I couldn't even find the courage to pull the notepad from the pocket of my bag, unnerved as I was from that unrelenting female voice and the name with the two vowels that it bore. My steps were measured and steady. I wanted to lose myself among the outlines of the walkers, reflected in the dark store windows.

I had crossed two blocks. The city's characteristics these days are two: darkness and drifting. The city authorities are slow to light the street lamps in an attempt, you'd think, to save even the smallest amount of money. Or perhaps it's the daylight saving time that is to blame, which invites the evening an hour earlier these winter days. The hotels have shuttered their facades to protect their rooms. Behind the iron grating, everything's remained untouched, as if they'd been hastily abandoned in the midst of an oncoming disaster: the forks still poised on the tables, the keys dangling by the reception desk.

Everywhere you meet people who move aimlessly without obvious destination or goal. They often take a few steps in a direction and suddenly stop, return where they started and afterward drift into an unfathomable vacillation, something like an autistic lullaby.

I try to hide my emotions from the eyes of my fellow humans. I try to become invisible.

I hadn't made thirty steps when I stumbled over a human creature, doubled over, like a giant snail at my feet. In his hand he was holding the torn piece of a cardboard box. Crooking his body in half as he'd done, with his face nearly in contact with the sidewalk, it was impossible to read the writing on his sign. It must have been the refrain that he was mumbling, bent down: *'I'm hungry. I'm hungry.'*

As if he were making his confession to the cement.

What's happened here, such that everyone now speaks with orphaned words? I think of all those who wander the city aimlessly in the evenings, either mumbling their own, single word or holding it on a piece of paper. As if their existence has been reduced to a single, monolectic descriptor.

The image of the bent man gave one the impression of a living piece of refuse. Nearby a stray dog had lain down on the cement, but its back was turned, gazing listlessly at the vehicles that passed, joyfully dangling its front legs on the edge of the sidewalk.

*

In general, the bent man's stance—collapsed from disappointment, from hunger, from drugs, or lack thereof—gave off a sense of calm resignation, as if in one sense he felt no need to make his presence felt. Perhaps he himself understood his presence as human trash, while his outer appearances seemed—despite the callousness and harshness of his surroundings—paradoxically alluring, since I allowed myself to believe that people become perforce virtuous and worthy of trust when they find themselves on the edge of abject squalor. What I mean is inhuman, leveling misery. While in contrast there are those who act as if they are sympathetic and easy-going, plying that tremendous talent of smiling politely, prim and proper, while they do their neighbors wrong.

I bent over to pet the dog and felt a presence at my side. First, though, I should note the appearance of a priest. Then a public worker who passed by in a gloom and, immediately after, following at the same pace, an army officer. And one more passerby whom it would not be right to leave without record or observation: a scavenger.

The time: approximately eight in the evening. The city has grown silent these last few days. The public works have ceased and most leave their cars locked, preferring to walk or shove themselves into the buses that, full as they are, seem less dirty now.

Perhaps that's why—because the city has grown silent of late—that this new, sharp sound, which appeared suddenly in the streets last winter, seems so threatening. A metallic shriek that we'd not known before. Wandering scavengers with their noisy grocery carts zigzag the streets looking for anything in the trash that might be converted into

cash. Most often pieces of metal or cables.

One night the street had filled with small weightless pieces of a white, frothy material. Waves formed like those of the sea as they swayed in the evening wind and were drawn away by the passing cars. It was as if the road's surface had blossomed or had been transformed into a film set with false snow. A dark man was trying to gut some mattress that had been thrown into the street, working quickly with his knife so as to remove the final metal springs that had resisted him before being thrown into his overloaded cart.

CRUSHED TO PULP INSIDE THE GARBAGE TRUCK.

Early morning Sunday yet another tragedy was recorded among the unseen destitute in Tavros, as a homeless man, who had climbed into a garbage container to protect himself from the cold, was torn apart by the garbage truck. The public employees had moved the container in which the man was sleeping without realizing his presence. As the trash was being emptied into the vehicle, the hapless man began to call out for help and the machine was halted. The fire and rescue team was alerted and the homeless man was disengaged and later transferred to a hospital, where he passed away due to grave injuries. His identity remained unknown through the night, though it is likely he was Greek, approximately 50 years old. In order to identify the victim, the results of a coroner's examination and DNA analysis are expected today (Nov. 1, 2010).

To sell their metal, the scavengers must daily cross quite a few kilometers to the edge of the suburbs, where the scrap yards are. Despite this, they walk from neighborhood to neighborhood pushing their carts till morning. Ghosts among the ghosts.

The dog refreshed itself in the stagnant water on the sidewalk. Two elegant ladies with impressively short skirts and fine-stitched leather boots reaching up to their knees pass by, a momentary discordance. Time to continue my walk.

The city seems to have turned inside out. As if someone had stuck his hand in a sock and pulled. All that was once destined for that space protected from the public eye, all that had remained hidden—or rather private—within the four walls of the house, now takes place unshielded in the middle of the street. The care of the body, the basic functions such as sleep and food, confrontations and flirtations now spill out hopelessly all around us, driven by neither shame nor the audacity of pleasure, but a raw nervous spasm.

*

I open a parenthesis in my memory. I met A. a few days earlier in the bus depot. We were sitting on adjacent benches waiting for the same bus. He was around fifty and his hair hid his face as he bent over the cart with his belongings. He wore a blue shirt. He was lean, wiry and broken. His hands were thin and delicate, marked with gashes and bruises. He was looking at the asphalt as he spoke quietly with an employee who seemed to know him and to tolerate his presence in the station. As soon as the dialogue ended and the employee moved away, A. got up with slow motions and looked in the garbage bin next to us. He found a Styro-foam cup from a fast food restaurant with nothing but ice inside. He returned to his seat and began to chew the ice with jittery motions, ignoring those around him.

At some point he lifted his head and looked at me. He had a beard of two days. He gave off that sharp, unpleasant smell of the unwashed human body.

‘How are you?’ I said.

‘Okay,’ he replied, with his single word, looking at me.

I hadn't expected an answer.

I convey here what I recall from our conversation. The rhythms of his speech have faded from my memory, but he spoke with words both even and intelligible. He was not the worst of cases. We spoke of the weather and how long he'd been on the street. He asked me what I did and—with some reservation—I told him the truth: I wrote. It didn't bother him to talk with a writer. He didn't ask anything more.

'It's been a year,' he continued, 'I'm 53, but I have chronic emphysema. I have trouble breathing. When things fall apart, it's hard to pick yourself back up. You can't get off the street.'

'How long have you been on the street?'

'A year, I told you. Since I came here.'

'Yes. From where?'

'Eh, from the country...I decided to come to Athens because I'd been here before, understand? It's tough being on the street here. But at least you can find something to eat every now and again.'

'What work did you do?'

'Plumbing.'

'And you're okay here?'

'Yeah. Most often the police don't care. Even if they take you in, they'll just throw you back out. I asked them once to keep me. We don't have room for you here, they say.'

'The police?'

'Yeah. "Let me spend a few hours during the night, won't you?"

I said. "No" they say.'

'Where do you usually stay?'

'In the street. Cardboard...In the park...I was sleeping on the benches too, and eating at the food kitchen. For months on end I couldn't wash myself. No one takes in a fifty-year-old for work. So much the more when he smells of his own filth. Later I started collecting paper for recycling. I got a form from a doctor saying I've got a long-term illness.'

As he mentioned the form I noticed inside his shirt a white bandage high on his sternum. He started coughing.

‘It’s good, this talking.’

‘*Really?*’ I said startled

‘Yeah. It’s good to talk with someone.’

I was mostly nodding my head, letting him say whatever came to him.

‘So, a lot of them are new to the street. They get a small pension and they can’t do anything, they just can’t do anything, and so they sit out in the street and they stay here. They can’t pay rent. And they try to cheat you. If you try to cheat you. If you try to share a room once every so often, they won’t pay, understand?’

‘What do you mean? Share a hotel room?’

‘Yeah, some night for a bath and a good sleep.’

‘Yeah, I know. Tell me what happened when you got ill. You have family?’

‘I don’t have family, no relatives either. I want to get off the street, but there’s no way.’

He stopped for a few seconds.

‘I get 260 Euro from social services, but I didn’t get my check this last time. I don’t know what happened. There are others who get more and still wind up in the street.’

‘Where do you cash it?’

‘At a teller.’

‘O.K.’ I said.

‘I didn’t get my check and everything fell apart.’

‘Why didn’t it come?’

‘I don’t know, I lost it.’

‘Do you spend a lot of time here?’

‘Yeah. As long as the buses are in service.’

‘All right’ I answered.

‘It’s hard, you get old, you die, you don’t have family and you’re homeless and you can’t get off the street. Don’t ask...Honestly, I don’t want to live anymore. But I don’t want to get killed. Just today I thought, I’ll just throw myself in front of one of these buses, understand? But it’s nearly impossible to get off the street.’

‘There’s no one out there to help you?’

His answer was a rasping chortle. He got up suddenly and approached someone passing by who had just tossed his cigarette on the ground. He stood there in the midst of the crowd, threw his head back and dragged hard on the cigarette.

✱

My wandering had not yet reached its conclusion. The desire to lose myself in the repetition of the walk had not yet been sated. Friday evening is a strange hour. The night grows enigmatic as the day comes to a halt and Saturday is born from the darkness. There’s an expectation poised in the balance; the week seems expended or, rather, near its brief periodic stasis, before it spills itself again into the timeless cycle of the everyday.

The sky was clear as far as the eye could see. The apartment buildings were stacked the one next to the other with the same eternal, unchanging sequence. Only the circles of light from the vehicles in the street ruined the harmony of the darkness as they passed. I pressed my back up against the wall as a dark car slowed next to me. The driver turned off the headlights and the car rolled forward blindly. There was only a small gleam from the dashboard that cast its dull light into the cabin and the bursts of the blinker, like a mute siren. A gentle push of the gas and the car began to crawl backward to align itself with the curb. Suddenly a human figure appeared and began gesturing, directing the driver so as to execute the necessary maneuvers immediately.

The thin young man bent over the rear windshield until the driver could see him in the mirror; he held up his hand and showed him how many times to turn the steering wheel to the left. His right hand carved out an imaginary leftward circle several times over in the darkness, with his pointer finger hoisted up. When the car reached the appropriate point he raised his palm prohibitively and lay his other hand gently on the trunk as if to bring the car to a halt with his body. As yet not a word had passed between the two. All this choreography, to me unknown, was being carried out in silence, with an understanding that reached deeper than speech. The driver obediently followed the directions of this unknown man, without offering the slightest of objections. Without having come to some agreement beforehand. The strange gesture of help, completely unsolicited, was moreover unnecessary, since a large, empty stretch of curb lay before us. This small performance had three players: the unknown choreographer, the driver as dancer, and me, in the role of the viewer.

Afterwards the young man lifted his palms up, parallel with the ground, and simultaneously began to direct the car backwards with a nod of the head, as if in approval. And then again the coming to a stop, the lifting of the right hand. The turn of the wheel. The stop. And afterwards the final reverse towards the vehicle's final place of rest.

As soon as the driver killed the engine, the young man approached the window and held his palm out one last time. Having gained a few coins he closed his palm and turned, approaching me with a quick pace and throwing me a glance both unwavering and invisibly threatening. He passed a few centimeters in front of me. I tried to step back but I was already even with the wall, and he shoved me suddenly with his right shoulder. Not with force, but with intent. Without a word. He walked away, turning his face for one last glance, as if a reminder.

Only then did I understand what had happened. I approached the edge of the road and, looking into the distance, I was able to make out tens of young men standing at strictly predetermined distances every

two blocks, waiting for some passing car to stop and park, so as to offer the same peculiar service in exchange for a few coins. It was something I'd never seen. I don't drive, so as a consequence this view of the city, the daily view of the driver, was unknown to me.

Only then did I understand the scenario of this short scene. The man had literally jumped in front of the car, since my presence threatened his own space, to which he'd long since staked a claim. He'd imagined I was there to steal a piece of his small dominion.

*

I decided to go home. I'd grown tired of this walk. It was not my body but my mood that had begun to deteriorate. The room where I was writing now seemed by far more appealing.

I lowered my eyes and walked slowly, faithfully following the ridges in the sidewalk for the blind. It was a game. You limit your eyes to a narrow field of vision and sharpen your remaining senses. It's at this point that the microcosm of the city explodes into an entire universe. Thousands of forms are enclosed within the details of every sidewalk tile.

The rail for the long cane resembled a jagged train line as observed from the height of an airplane. It was as if I'd become as small as a toy and was flying slowly between the buildings. I jumped over someone's legs, stretched out along the sidewalk. I turned the corner that I knew would lead me to the room where I was writing and suddenly a blast of awful music spilled out from the window of some passing car. Every so often a fissure would break the continuity of the channel in the pavement that was leading me: a water meter connected to the subterranean pipes, sticking out from the sidewalk; a shattered red tile like a splintered mirror. And further along, another impediment, a piece of trash, a piece of scrap iron.

I remembered the response of a Swedish friend, when she'd visited the city some years earlier and I'd asked her first impression: 'It is like a museum, but so much of it is destroyed,' she'd answered. Perhaps it was her bad English, but for a long time I couldn't understand why she'd chosen the word 'destroyed.' Later I realized that in our own mind we've connected the everyday with ruins and we've grown accustomed to the sight of incompleteness, disrepair, or actual destruction. Perhaps that's why the living, human ruins around us fail to leave an impression. In the end she was right: we've been transformed into a museum of ruins.

Moreover life next to ruins is for us unavoidable. Ruins are in a sense alive. We live among them, literally. We walk along ruined streets bearing ancient names that allude to ancient battles and disasters. In the summer we scurry off to the partially ruined ancient theaters. Our experiences are determined, usually subconsciously, by internalized doctrines and practices that have been constructed and reinforced by a forged image of the self or a false memory of our past as lived remembrance.

The rubble that surrounds us—not only the ancient ruins but the broken marbles of the squares or the facades of the hotels, the broken lamps, the metal rooted up from the ground, the human ruins—they become the mirror in which we make out our own likeness. We often end up hating a version of what we see, and so we simply choose not to look. This is likely the most essential complication: the continual feeling that our past constitutes both a reminder and an ineluctable cause of our condition today.

Our city might be described quite clearly along the lines of our own desire for it. It is nothing more than a heterotopia. In other words, a utopia (or a dystopia—depending on the occasion) that's actually been realized. This is the framework, here in Athens, that absorbs, represents, is matched against and distorts the city itself, its historical layers, its symbolic content and our relations to them.

*

The last image from my walk was a scavenger searching in a wheeled trash bin with both hands, lighting its contents with a small flashlight he held in his mouth. I was at some distance and I couldn't make out his figure clearly. He must have lifted his gaze for a moment, looking in my direction. The road that night was dark and the sky clear. The tenuous beam from the small flashlight shimmered momentarily like a star in the distance.

Afterwards he bent over again and turned his attention to the bin.

For a mere moment, the garbage had converged with the constellations.

ÁLEX CHICO [SPAIN]

‘The Chameleon’s Shapes’ ‘Las formas del camaleón’

From the flash fiction anthology *Desahuciados. Crónicas de la Crisis*

2013

Translated by Megan Berkobien

I watch the grass grow while eating breakfast. The task takes a while, fifteen minutes perhaps. Then I put on my diving suit and plunge into the golf course lake. My job is to retrieve the lost balls for the players. Later on, I strip off my clothes and begin to try out Durex condoms. A profession, it should be noted, that's much more complicated than the last. I abandon my erection and search for *la americana*. I find a position in one of those big wholesale warehouses and begin counting people. I take advantage of the moment, since I'm already there, to survey passers-by. Or I offer myself up and wash their cars. Or I speak to them about a recently opened dental clinic. I am a customs official while I eat, a metal welder on break, and a hotel receptionist at nightfall. At nine on the dot I don a thermal suit and go up to the guest-rooms. I warm up their beds for exactly ten minutes.

GONÇALO M. TAVARES [PORTUGAL]

Excerpts from

Matteo Lost His Job *Matteo perdeu o emprego*

2010

Translated by David Swartz

1.

Matteo—yes, Matteo himself—rang the bell of the building. From above, a young female voice.

‘I came because of the ad’ said Matteo.

He had left a three-day-old newspaper at home, on the table, on top of several month-old newspapers.

On the cover of one of the newspapers is the photograph of a machine emitting smoke. An explosion, an attempt, he no longer remembers.

Matteo’s wife screamed because of something that happened in the kitchen, or in the world. She screamed and at the same time she called for silence. Matteo didn’t answer. Two chairs for the children and a small yellow bicycle that had not been used in months. The back tire was flat, and the bell was missing.

But now Matteo is in front of the door on the second floor, as described in the newspaper ad.

He advances, prepared. But he doesn’t really know what for.

The woman who placed the ad opens the door. The first shock. The woman has no arms. Matteo says nothing, what is there to say?

He tries to look everywhere but at that woman, as if he was investigating the house. It’s no use. It’s just fear.

The woman’s face seems to have a life of its own, it is even too nice, as if the rest of her body existed merely to support the face, from which nothing comes out, not even a sound—which forces Matteo, still shaking, to say:

‘I didn’t understand the ad.’

The ad asked for someone to assist a young lady in various activities.

‘It might seem ridiculous’, she said, ‘but when it’s raining...’

And there was silence.

‘Before’, she continued, ‘I had an older woman come to help me.’

And there was silence again.

‘Do you accept?’ she asks.

2.

It's raining, and Matteo holds a large umbrella for two. Anna's body is only a few centimeters from Matteo's. He trembles. They are too close. He already feels the heat of her body, and he doesn't like it.

Anna is thirty-two years old, a beautiful face. In another situation, if the world was different, Matteo would have been radiant at that moment, to be walking with a woman with a face like that. He couldn't remember ever having walked beside a face like that.

Matteo was still holding the umbrella, even though it was not really raining anymore. Under Anna's guidance the two of them arrived at the door of a building. With his left hand holding the handle, Matteo used his right hand to pull down the top of the umbrella, closing it. Now holding the umbrella in his right hand, he opened the door of the building with the other.

'Please, come in.'

Anna had to tend to some things and Matteo's presence was indispensable.

Now they are on one of the upper floors, already sitting in front of an employee who, given the circumstances, was being so overly nice that all his good intentions came crashing somewhere on the floor, wasted. Someone was going to sweep them up and they wouldn't be good for anyone else.

Observing this excess of delicate manners, Matteo felt like hitting the man.

Anna asked if it was possible, and it was. Then, Matteo, according to the protocol they had prepared to that effect, signed a document on behalf of Anna.

(...)

The chimp who belonged to Guzi the cobbler had always entertained Matteo, but that day it was beginning to annoy him. After locking the doors, Guzi had let him loose, and the monkey was on Matteo's back, kissing him or trying to, clinging to him with those two agile monkey arms, arms that can do so much so quickly that any human worker ought to respect them. The monkey—that was what Guzi called him—had both arms around Matteo's neck, and with those long black fingers, searched for tiny somethings in his human head. Then he screamed and jumped around the room. (When he's happy he doesn't stop; he jumps from the table to the wall to the ceiling—as if he were in a circus.)

'Stop, monkey' says Guzi, the owner. But the monkey doesn't stop. Meanwhile, Matteo has been there for hours, and not a single client has showed up for Guzi.

'It's amazing' says Guzi. 'Not a single person. People don't walk anymore, they just stand still. Nobody buys anything, but at least they could walk from one side to another. Last week I repaired two pairs of shoes. Do you know what will come out of this? I'm going to have to eat the monkey. Some day I'll eat the monkey.'

What worries Matteo is that something is decomposing quickly in the room of his friend Guzi. Matteo had been three weeks ago, and now it was much worse.

'The landlord says he'll shoot me and I told him that I'll give him the monkey when I'm six months late. It's worth six months. I only owe him five months. I have one more month. Or else, I'll eat the monkey. I'm beginning to get hungry.'

Matteo goes on to say that in many countries they eat monkeys and that the meat is good. The monkey seems to realize that they're talking about him and keeps running from one side to the other. He realizes that they're talking about him, but he doesn't understand that—albeit in jest

—they’re talking about eating him. The monkey is happy and Matteo feels sorry for him. He also feels sorry for Guzi and for himself.

‘You’ve been working that job for four months, and you haven’t gotten used to it yet?’ Matteo doesn’t answer. He just nods. ‘No one gets used to that’ he says to his friend Guzi.

5.

Again the same question and a nod of the head.

‘Nobody gets used to that.’

Matteo had just arrived and was shaking. He said he was going to leave the job, which he couldn’t take anymore. Carla, Matteo’s wife, had been straightforward: we need the money.

That same afternoon, for the first time, it happened. Obviously, Matteo didn’t tell his wife about it. He simply said he wanted to leave the job, which he couldn’t take anymore.

In the afternoon, Anna had invited Matteo to sit next to her and watch television. Matteo, as usual, walked towards the television and turned it on with his right index finger. He left the room for a few minutes, then came back. On the screen, a woman was lying in bed kissing a man’s testicles. Matteo stood motionless at the entrance of the room. He didn’t say a word. Anna was still on the couch looking at Matteo. Red-faced, her eyes fixed, she asked if he wanted to sit down. Matteo didn’t move. I have to go, he said.

6.

It must have been weeks since he visited Guzi. Matteo was horrified. The door to the street was closed, and Matteo thought that was absurd. How did he expect to draw customers?

Then he entered and stopped, without reacting. Guzi had grown a huge beard and he looked terrible. He found the monkey motionless

beside him, and when Matteo entered, unlike he would usually do, the monkey didn't move. The monkey was thinner, Guzi was thinner.

'I'm about to eat the monkey' said Guzi.

The monkey might have realized that they were talking about him, but he didn't move. He looked sad.

There was a bad smell and Matteo noticed that in the corners of the room, there was urine.

'The landlord let me stay. He said that nobody else wants this joint. A good guy. Anyways, it don't solve nothing. You can't eat the walls.'

'The monkey is sick' Matteo said.

'The monkey is hungry' Guzi replied.

'Now he's quiet and still, but certain times of day, he must remember his eating schedules... he begins jumping around and scratching me. He's already attacked me'

Guzi is sitting in front of his work table, patching some boots.

'I'll resolve several problems. I'm going to eat the monkey' said Guzi.

7.

Anna is on top of Matteo and her hips twist in a self-determined rhythm. Matteo is on the chair in the living room, facing the screen, sometimes looking at it, and his penis is as hard as he ever thought it could be. He grabs Anna's hips, with both hands, tracking her movements, and trying not to think about anything else, trying above all not to look up, his eyes fixed—if anything—on her face and sometimes—to avoid looking at it—on the arms that aren't there. Turning his head away slightly he sees two penises on the screen and a mouth that is moving from one to the other.

8.

When his wife embraces him, Matteo begins shaking. His wife's arms around his body repulse him. For many months, Matteo was avoiding his

wife Carla, but at the same time, sometimes in the kitchen or in living room, he would admire her hands, the way they moved or carried objects from one place to another. Like a magic trick: pick up a plate, take it off the shelf and put it on a table.

He had only lost control once. Upon leaving Anna's house after his shift, about a block away, he encountered a friend he hadn't seen in a long time and, with instinctive joy, he reached out for his hand. It was after feeling its cool touch that Matteo suddenly fell apart and had to lower his head so that his friend wouldn't notice.

When at home, Matteo felt something strange, as if there existed two parallel worlds, and as if his job wasn't human, but something else. He watched his children, sometimes played games with them that involved manipulating small objects. On such occasions, he felt like he was falsifying something, as if, in one way or another—in that house or at work dealing with Anna—he was playing a part. During the week he spent about ten hours a day with Anna—and what he earned justified those hours. But after work the return to the world was disturbing. Outside of Anna's house everything was kind of muddled. He didn't know where to put his arms, they seemed useless, he thought he could throw them away.

'Guzi is going crazy' Matteo said to his wife. 'He says he's going to eat the monkey.'

9.

He rang the bell. It was a man's voice. Matteo suddenly relieved. He was unemployed again. He went up.

The door opened electrically. Matteo entered. The man was about thirty years old, more or less his own age. He was wearing a t-shirt. Matteo was disgusted. But this time the impression was not as strong. The stumps were in sight, but Matteo made an effort not to look.

'There are a number of things that I need help with' said the man.

Matteo nodded his head.

10.

Matteo slams the door of his house. He's furious. He wants to avoid yet another discussion. Holding it with one arm, he takes out the bicycle. It no longer works and none of the children uses it. His wife insisted he throw it in the trash. Nobody will buy it, it only takes space.

Matteo quit his second job five months ago and he hasn't found another one.

He throws the bike on top of a pile of waste and watches. Immediately, an old woman approaches, and tries to figure out how she could use it.

He's furious with his wife, with the screams that won't stop in the house, however, he tries to control himself.

Three days ago he was with Guzi and the situation was critical. The monkey wouldn't budge. He was on the verge of dying, and Guzi had defecated in front of him, in the corner. The bathroom no longer worked.

Matteo could not remain more than a few minutes inside.

In any case he could only talk, and that didn't help. He didn't have any money. It is useless to go, he thinks, but he goes.

Eight in the morning. He has to break into the shop. There is no response and no noise. He breaks into the shop. Immediately he sees Guzi's torn shoes, then Guzi, a little higher, swinging. The smell is death, there are feces and urine everywhere. Matteo screams and opens the door of the small annex. The monkey is there.

11.

With both hands holding something wrapped in plastic, Matteo advances determinedly. With that package he must cross one of the busiest streets of the city. He enters the subway. Then gets out and passes through a roundabout where, earlier, there had been a serious accident.

As if carrying a small child or an animal to eat at a party, Matteo holds the package, already feeling pain in his muscles for keeping his arms bent and tense.

People smell the odor, distancing themselves. Matteo gets off at Feira Station, and with both hands cradling the wrapped package, he goes all the way up the stairs of the subway to the top. Seeing again the light of day, he breathes, relieved.

(...)

CARE SANTOS [CATALONIA]

‘Purchase Agreement’ ‘Compraventa’

From the flash fiction anthology *Desahuciados. Crónicas de la Crisis*

2013

Translated by Megan Berkobien

On top of being downtown and also perfect for our needs, the apartment was a steal. There was only one problem: we found a middle-aged couple on the balcony. They didn't appear to be clients.

'Who are those people outside?' I asked the bank officer in charge of the real estate sector.

'Ah, those two... Don't you worry, they come with the apartment. They're the former owners. We had to seize the house from them on an outstanding mortgage payment. They sleep on the balcony and live on scraps. They know how everything works, even better than the multitasking robot we give out with certain loans.'

'And they don't cause problems?' my girlfriend asked.

'Rarely,' the agent said, with a self-important gesture. 'They know that if they do, we'll increase the interest rate on the loan still binding them to our bank.'

We breathe easy and seal the deal.

KATHARINA SCHULTENS [GERMANY]

Poems from

Gorgo's Portfolio. Poems *gorgos portfolio. Gedichte*

2014

Translated by Silke-Maria Weineck

massive attack

the taxi driver dismissed me
he drove off the steps of the stairs
i fell asleep with wet hair
he rang the bell when I was not dreaming

he had converted his a/c
it now served to dry my hair in the morning
i put my make-up on in the elevator to the 12th floor

we had a cold storage room there
hallways lined in leather
the office walls pure screens
and nothing was being forgotten

—

i remained and every evening sent him
my reflection in floor deep window glass
the weather varied but not my expression
i had perfected this cinematic dramaturgy

—

in the mornings at dawn i usually went dancing
there was this club its staircases changed
i danced with a colleague dressed as a bear
i wore the boots from the office

when i twirled each time i ground my heel
precisely between the toes of his paws
i was almost sure he was barefoot unintentionally

then when the twirl was completed i opened
my lids after all i was still an intern
they had granted me two snakes

i raised my arms pushed all my fingers deep into my hair
and activated as a test this one gaze
the tongues flashed: brilliant-
reflex. For that was enough

gorgo

for now i can still visit the colleagues
as the night shift's nursing assistant

they lie on white tables
their biers for casual friday

they are breathing no worries

—

i extinguish the night light
my reflection in the mirror vanishes

i shut down the computers
charging stations hum through the room

should one of them wear his headset in his sleep
the cables will drag him to the snake pit.

—

project management today had the women's
heads shaved per perseus just in case

that does not change the interim feedback one bit
on the roof terrace my marble garden grows

—

at dawn i come carrying a display
my bronzen hands collect each stir

now my transition into illness is not far

perseus says a pegasus sleeps in my flesh
i think what lies dormant within is the relapse i crave

perseus

how to begin: go to the things and grab them by the hair
do they carry snakes? a problem but not without a solution.

you always need a display polished to a shine
you always need a ballpoint pen
that can be extended into a sword

to kill would be putting it harshly
i prefer to speak of outsourcing
the model's underachievers. ok?

you: i can formulate such letters
only I cannot sign them at this time
my ballpoint pen does not support the format

privately: certainly another box
sure i transmitted office methods
but what you are accusing me of was an oversight:

it was never about any head for me
it was not about victory either
i solved a difference

BRUCE BÉGOUT [FRANCE]

‘Melancholy Chronicles of an Itinerant Rose Seller’

‘Chroniques mélancoliques d’un vendeur de roses ambulant’

From the short story collection *L’accumulation primitive de la noirceur*

2014

Translated by Shannon K. Winston

I.

It is very hard to be invisible. Yet, I somehow managed to. I totally disappeared without leaving a trace. Neither seen, nor known. How did I do it? That's easy: I'm the type of person one does not notice in the streets. And when they do notice me, what this arouses in those who, by the greatest of chances, pay me a little attention, is an immediate disapproving pout. One must say that I occupy a social position that, contrary to what one could have thought, is particularly ungrateful: I sell roses illegally in restaurants, at night. And, be brave enough to admit it, I am not welcome among you. I wear the multicolored star of the pariah. Even if I am allowed to circulate furtively between the tables, I feel only disapproving eyes continually envelope my unassuming body. The small happiness that I sell in passing and which, I was foolish enough to believe, should have made me deserve a certain charity—or at least a visible sign of cheerfulness (occasions to rejoice being so rare these days) – attracts nothing but disdain. The offering of a rose has lost its enchantment, and my clients' sullen faces testify to this *crisis of faith* in the unifying power of flowers. I even ask myself why the managers themselves tolerate my arrival because they never fail, as soon as they notice me, to turn their backs and plug their noses at the very sight of me. For the eight months that I've been doing this *gig*—this horrible word is nevertheless the most accurate in capturing the precarious and disdainful fashion of my occupation—no patron has shaken my hand, made an amicable gesture in my direction, or asked me my name. One could say that I shame them like a necessary yet sordid duty. Certain less hypocritical people don't hesitate to refuse me entry because of my appearance, which, in their words, *threatens the standing of the establishment*. To tell the truth, this social humiliation no longer really affects me. In the beginning, it made me sad, and I didn't understand it. While rambling around, I would curse human maliciousness. At present, this debasement, which accompanies me almost everywhere I go, ravishes me. I even make use of it. It is as if I draw a new energy from it, a strange power.

I absorb this contempt that surrounds me. I drink it like blotting paper. My cells ingest it little by little in microscopic gulps and I almost hear, during my nocturnal moments of rest, the squishy sound of this continual suction. Yet I don't simply make an armor out of it. That would be too simple, too easy. No. I absorb it patiently. *I incorporate it into myself*. This disdain does not clothe me; it nourishes me, and makes me grow. It is my substance, my protoplasmic soup, the maternal milk of my cynicism. I draw from it the force to provoke as much indifference and disgust I can get. And, when—with so many contortions, grimaces, tear-inspiring phrases and contrite gazes—I succeed in engendering discomfort and embarrassment in people who attempt to ignore me, I feel an indescribable delight spreading within me.

II.

I was born on May 21, 1967 in the North West of India, in Chandigarh, the city that owes its urban design to the Swiss architect Le Corbusier. I am the second of six children in a cultivated and open-minded middle-class family. I received a degree in political science from the University of Mumbai where, six years later in 1997, I also defended a doctorate of anthropology which received the highest academic distinction and circulated in book form from a publishing house in Goa. The subject of my thesis focused on 'The Ritual of the Rua Among Negro Tribes from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.' I never succeeded in becoming integrated into my country's higher education, which is corrupted by money, nepotism, and a clannish state of mind. In order to live and make a living, I taught literature, law, and geography in different secondary schools of the Punjab region. I was nevertheless able to pursue my anthropological research on Andaman and Nicobar and, during my free time and with my own means, I specialized in particular in the study of the people of the North Sentinel Island (it doesn't go by any other name) that is renowned precisely for being the least well-known, the most hostile to penetration by the exterior world, the most resistant to fieldwork. Certain ethnographers paid for their curiosity with their

lives and their bodies were never found; they were probably devoured during a joyous ritual of appropriation of the enemy. The world has ingrained in its mind these images taken a few years ago after the 2004 tsunami when a helicopter full of army officials went to see if the situation was stabilized; they were attacked by furious men with spears and arrows who emerged from the stone age. But, thanks to the perseverance and prudence that I learned by belonging to a forbidden political party, I had the opportunity to meet a guide who, after many long debates and a few bribes, led me to two hundred members of this ethnic group which is, one could say, the most isolated in the world. Unfortunately, upon my return, I was not able to share my research findings with the scientific community. For certain reasons that would take too long to explain here but that stem broadly from the inherent difficulties encountered by anyone who throws himself into a radical fight, what one of my bosses called ‘the zone of bullets in the head,’ I had to flee my country, abandon my family, take the route of exile, and slip clandestinely into Europe. I came to France in October 2010 on a very windy day—in which I saw neither good nor bad omens, but something new, alive, and fresh. Since then, I get by thanks to some tiring work and a community of faithful friends whose solidarity is proportional to my misfortune. After a week of adjustments and discoveries, I was able to observe that, for those seeking refuge, the inhabitants of this country do not concede anything to the bellicose tribes of the Indian Ocean.

III.

The general contempt that overburdens me is simply the inverse of the disdain that the people who disdain me feel for themselves. They can’t stand not hating me, me the poor undocumented immigrant who sweats water and blood in pitiful conditions for his miserable scrap of bread. In truth, it is not directly me that they hate, but the very fact of hating me. And, bizarrely, by an inexplicable reversal, they hate me even more for that. Indeed, they feel guilty for maligning me because, given my situation, they should offer me a certain amount of goodwill, even compas-

sion. But that is not the case. This sudden renunciation of generosity afflicts them like a slap received in public. They thus hold me responsible for the guilt that they feel. For, if I did not exist, they would not suffer the affront of their feelings of powerlessness. It is hard for them to admit that we belong to the same human race and that we are distanced from one another thanks to a welfare system that could collapse from one day to the next. Therein lies the core of their disgust: the wall that separates us is no more solid than the ground on which they stand. I remind them of the pitiful image of their own vulnerability which they precisely seek to repress. The disgrace of my condition has been attenuated by my independence. With twelve of my compatriots, who have brown skin and jet-black hair, I work for Moira, a hostile Bengali who is calculating, dishonest, and pathologically thin, and whose animal equivalent would be a cockroach. He exploits our situation and tantalizes us with the prospect of becoming legal residents some day—sometime in which no one believes, not even him. Every day, I go to the suburbs to a dusty warehouse which—sandwiched between an illegal carpooling zone and an abandoned scrap metal yard—resembles a depot, away from the big commercial thoroughfares. There, seated on a barrel, Moira sells us bouquets for 30 € apiece that he buys in bushels of 300 the same morning at the region's wholesalers and that he preserves upright on their stems in galvanized iron bowls. Each bouquet contains twenty roses that we resell for 2 € apiece. This means that, if I succeed in selling my entire bouquet in an evening, in the best-case scenario all that I have left in my pocket is 10 €. Yet, it is very rare that I can sell all of my merchandise. Most of the time, when my mood is right, or the climate, or the circumstances, I succeed in selling about ten roses to the masses that temporarily gather in warm and lit places, especially on Friday evenings. But it is more frequent, after an entire night spent crossing the city in all directions, that I succeed in selling only two or three, or even none. I have thus walked kilometers upon kilometers, avoided dog shit and puddles of piss, inhaled night air that tasted like beer, crossed the path of club kids, talked to drug addicts, speculated about

miraculous sales, dreamed of another life, opened dozens of doors, navigated between hundreds of tables, made the same speech—all that for nothing.

IV.

Do I need to specify that the smell of roses has always seemed atrocious to me? They have a chemical note that turns, at the slightest increase of temperature, into bitterness. In the beginning, when I began this marvelous work which consists, through small gestures, in embellishing the quotidian dullness of the overburdened Occident, I sold roses called *Cuisse de nymphe émue* (*The Thigh of an Aroused Nymph*) that were pastel mauve, delicate, almost diaphanous, with fine black veins that resembled gnarled webs—like veins against white skin emerging from water. It was the only type of rose whose fragrance seemed tolerable and, during this period, I wasn't forced to take several showers in a row in order to remove the odor from my body when I returned to the furnished apartment that I shared with compatriots. But Moira considered this choice too costly. His profit margin became too narrow, and he didn't see the commercial benefit of selling a luxury product to distracted people without taste and who, in any case, savored only the idea and not the thing itself, and who, once their object was consumed, immediately threw this ruling plant's splendor in the gutter of their post-coital dejection. We thus opted for a type of *Madame Meilland*. But very quickly, we realized that its smooth and penetrating fragrance—which recalled the purple dirt from Lake Naivasha where they were grown in bulk to the detriment of all reasonable agronomics—did not agree at all with the nocturnal exhalations that wafted through the streets, kitchen smells, humid armpits, and deodorants turned acrid. Worse yet, this fortuitous alliance of African sensuality and Western lanolin made the atmosphere stink so much that I was repelled faster than usual with a symbolic kick in the ass, which was just as painful as its physical equivalent because of its lack of finality. Finally, like a number of our competitors, we gave up and settled on the red rose, whose scientific name I forgot.

There are so many people at night in the streets, in bars, restaurants, that one would swear that they don't have homes. They live, it seems, perpetually outside because of their hatred of homes. One wonders why they bother paying rent in order to spend so little time in these places that they abandon at every opportunity. Unless the city's distractions function as their substitute abodes ? In one sense, they resemble me. We share the fact of being nowhere at home. In circles, they mingle, eat, drink, laugh, talk into the late hours of the night. They make noise, stagger, show their teeth. These are my clients. In a few weeks, I became a master in the art of furtively sliding into a restaurant and suddenly appearing, like a devil coming out of his box, at a corner of a table where no one is expecting me. I appreciate the effect of surprise that I provoke and the repugnance, which one immediately reads on shocked faces. Of course, I prioritize couples, my privileged target, but it also does not bother me to interrupt groups, even women who are alone. Although I speak an entirely correct French, I try to fake a pitiful accent that transforms my catch phrases into something almost inaudible. I repeat them with a stupid demeanor at least five times in a row like a badly learned lesson and I don't leave the table until exasperation disfigures my clients. The many 'no's' that resound one after the other do nothing. I remain planted there, grimacing out of misery, misfortune, and stupidity, trying to inspire guilty consciousness of the well-heeled people around me with my clumsy gestures and the pathetic looks that I perfected in front of the bathroom mirror. I am never truly satisfied until I succeed in producing the kind of irritation that grates on nerves. When I reach this stage, I experience a rare joy. A sense of accomplishment invades me. I know perfectly well that this isn't the right method, and that a polite smile and a more discrete attitude would be commercially more appropriate, but I can't stop myself. I like making myself into a fool, playing the trickster's role. Often, when the room is almost empty, and when no one can escape my intrusion, I improvise a mime performance and, like a grimy

and dislocated puppet, I mimic all the distress of the third world in a few movements. For a brief instant, I multiply myself into diverse masks and social signs. I play the flatterer, the beggar, the seducer, the obsequious valet, the filthy derelict, and the sick whiner. Before the owner can kick me the hell out, my awful pantomime summons all the vile scapegoats of misfortune and I secretly rejoice at being the last of this sad race.

(...)

VII.

I am often disappointed by the reactions that my appearance provokes. This oscillates between schoolboy jokes and a hackneyed romanticism that feigns sincerity. I rarely happen upon interesting people who give a funny reply, or even a spiritual one. Each time, or almost, all I get is enamored poses, vulgar laughs, false glamor or true kitsch. One must admit that my performance does not really allow for a quick response. My caricature of the poor wretch only elicits a response that is even more stereotypical, a type of mechanical abstraction of all lived experiences. But I don't hate them. Without a doubt, the atmosphere of these places does not facilitate things. Having said this, I don't feel any cynicism towards the little comedy of love performed by couples to which I awkwardly attempt to peddle my junk. I reserve my sense of satire for other situations. I would feel as though I were wasting my talent and choosing an easy way out if I caved in like that and turned into derision the little piece of happiness that they try to extract from destiny. I do not, however, prohibit myself from doing everything I can to upset them, and to harass them with my appalling demeanor and my idiotic insistences. I could have thrown bombs or derailed trains, annihilated by the fire and blood of this world that makes me so vile. At some point, I was ready to embrace terrorism. To get rid of all the chains, norms, scruples, to take the irreversible path of direct action. My political background would have led me there almost naturally. But, out of a lack of courage or conviction, I settled down with selling red flowers on which, on nights of

depression, I never hesitate to piss. That gives them a carmine sparkle that scintillates under the lights of the mediocre restaurants that I frequent. And I take advantage of the time I don't spend haggling, jabbering about something, or cruising, to make a few observations on primitive ethnography; I enrich what I call, in a whisper, my *anthroporama*. One can never truly change.

(...)

XIV.

For an undocumented immigrant, everywhere is a hunting ground. During my rounds, I always pay attention to who is following me, who is ahead of me, who observes me, who brushes up against me. Sometimes, I feel interrogating gazes upon me, and when I detect the presence of such a probing soul, I wedge myself in an obscure nook and I wait. I learned to identify rapidly little-known cracks and the shadows that they produce: the entryways of buildings, underground passageways, invisible corners, indistinct no-man's-lands hidden under the highway, lost alleyways. My fear creates an entirely new geography. From time to time, roundups take place downtown. They arrive in groups of four and arrest everyone who is not Caucasian and who has the dark complexion of an emigrant. I cannot, under these conditions, get caught up in even the smallest distraction. I am always on edge, my eyelids open like rolled up blinds, my pupils dilated like black suns. I forbid myself from strolling; each of my steps carries the mark of duty, the weight of a necessity that excludes any letting up. I am rarely seen whistling, my nose in the air, my hands in my pockets, distracted by the details that compose the urban landscape. I never take the exact same route; instead, I multiple false ones. In this, my long experience as an illegal immigrant helps me. Each of my movements requires a variety of strategies.

XV.

Under the setting sun that pours, between the rows of buildings, its reddish light—like in some apocalyptic Western film—I begin my rounds. The first few times, at the advice of my countrymen, I followed a precise path that should have maximized my sales. I would begin with the train station's district and progressed by following a counter-spiral movement that took me far from the periphery; I moved towards the center of town where the theaters and cinemas are. My path depended on peak bar and restaurant hours. But I learned one day that if I went randomly, in these animated streets that spoke of abandon and renunciation, without worrying a lot about tactical schemas, I obtained the same results. Mediocre numbers in all cases. I now give myself over freely to pure chance. Only uncertainty is able to assemble, in fleeting moments, things that have nothing to do with one another, erratic icebergs of experience that find themselves far from their original glacier. And if my earnings have not accrued as much as they could have, my pleasure wandering finds itself augmented.

XVI.

Over the course of my ramblings, I've met many bizarre and eccentric people: a circus of tortured existences cobbled together, unproductive, fantastical, celebratory good-for-nothings, bums, thieves, whores, informers, penniless artists, street scum, losers from adult education centers, spineless students, the stuttering vendor of contraband cigarettes, the psychotic distributor of flyers with his facial paralysis and his deranged tics, the thwarted lover who obsessively visits the sites of his misfortune, the Congolese bouncer who played the Archbishop of York in *Richard III*. My gift of observation has allowed me to make them emerge from behind the dense thickets of obscurity and to examine these people on sheets of glass like stem cells in a laboratory. I have this talent, which my background in anthropology has cultivated, for exposing what hides just under the threshold of other men's perceptions. My gaze, freed from all

prejudice, scrutinizes in a wolf-like manner the secrete range of attitudes, the traitorous details that expose it all. If, for others, all blends together, for me, everything keeps its singularity. It is as if this black veil around me sharpened my sight. Among these maniacs—who wouldn't look out of place in certain Asian cities where marginality is sacred—the billposter left a vivid memory. On several occasions, I had already noted his presence in the city blocks that surround the Opera. I thought that he belonged to a political party or worked for some live-events planner. There are so many posters on city walls that one does not always have the impulse to look precisely at what they are about. Their letters blend in with other urban signs and compose a giant book of eccentric typography that only has an equivalent among illuminated scrolls. The same could be said about these millions of faces which, barely perceived, immediately leave our consciousness. But, little by little, I learned to extract singular characters from this anonymous background. I practice a selective extraction. One fall night, when yellow leaves blew in the wind like confetti thrown from a balcony, I glanced behind the man's shoulder to a poster that was glued with large brushstrokes which, in that same instant, made me dream about the unrelenting efforts of an Indian elephant trader rubbing the back of his companion pachyderm. The poster was his résumé printed in giant letters. All was geometrically noted: his background, his different employment, his linguistic and technical skills, his hobbies. His black and white photo was perfectly centered above his name. The man posted it every hundred meters. He salvaged other copies washed away or crumpled up and was not stingy with the glue that smelled like cold endives. 'How sagacious', I told him using a French word that is a little refined to let him know that I was not some vulgar vagabond who commented without being invited into the lives of others. 'And how uncommon. That is free advertisement for you'. 'Yes, that's it, that's it. An operation of communication', he repeated in an absent tone, without irony. I noticed, at the bottom of the large poster, that his last professional experience dated back to three years ago. My social disposition was piqued. 'You're reaching the legal limit of the law,

is that it?' 'No, no it is because of the cyst.' 'What cyst?' I asked. 'Of my dead brother.' And he distanced himself with a grumpy demeanor; his head was slouched towards his shoulders. This man seemed deranged. His words did not have any meaning, any coherence. I did not see the connection between his poster and his dead brother. Intrigued, I followed him. With his roll of posters and his pot of glue under his arm, he walked in haste as if he were walking in front of something precise that he himself did not yet know anything about. His lively footsteps slapped the sidewalk with the overwhelming magnitude of a water drop hammering the bottom of a sink. I had trouble following him. I progressively fell behind. I almost started running behind him. After a hundred meters, I kept pace with him. I caught up in order not to give him the impression that I took him to be a traitor. 'I don't understand what you are saying', I said breathless. He answered me as if we had pursued a normal conversation in a calm place: 'The cyst, you see, the cyst. I lost my job because of this wretched cyst in my back.' 'Ah', I said, 'I am sorry, I'm sincerely sorry. It is cancerous?' 'No, no, not a tumor, or something of that sort. A big brown cyst, an intricate one, *the stunted embryo of my parasitic twin*. For thirty-eight years, I carried on my back *the stunted embryo of my twin*.'

(...)

XXV.

I am not one of those people who confusedly blend all the calamities of our time in order to favor a climate of fear. I am well aware that pessimism essentially constitutes the game of those who want nothing to change, and that it helps maintain order. Fear has always been, and will always be, the best instrument of domination. I dream about it often while walking; those who never cease deploring the state of the world serve the interest of those who render it deplorable. That is the vicious aspect of pessimism and what makes it unworthy. But the facts are there: weighing upon human life are the multiple threats that make existence

problematic. Great world dramas proliferate on the horizon, and humanity in its entirety seems to have abandoned all hope of a lasting improvement of its fate. A same sentiment simultaneously dominates the destitute as well as the wealthy: ‘run for your life and save what you can.’ The welfare-state slowly vacates the social scene that is immediately occupied with vigilantes in combat boots and insurance companies. The ensemble of efforts exclusively benefits the protection of the present at the expense of an uncertain, even impossible future. The end of the world escapes from the domain of the simply possible. Its shadow obscures each discourse, and gloom-mongering becomes a separate, well-established discipline. Is it thus necessary to blame the doctor for the illness that he diagnoses? It would be lost pointless and somewhat hypocritical. As it happens, one can trust the doctor when he identifies an evil of which he is also a victim, which he feels in his own flesh. My illness thus has a name, *melancholia*, this sad ability to see the somber side of things.

(...)

XXVIII.

I want to say here that my melancholy has no corporeal origin and that it flaws all traditional theories. As far as I can judge, I am a sane and happy human being, an easy-going person, who thinks little about death and illness, who does not know specific anguishes, who—despite the numerous misfortunes that overburden him—strolls through life with a certain enthusiasm; in short, an ordinary person in the most proper sense of the term; a person who, maybe because of his lack of personality, is a little inclined to inexplicable sadness, to sudden fits of anxiety. My very cynicism is of the playful kind. All this is to say that my melancholy, which is real and painful, does not reveal a psychological constitution or who knows what predisposition to a depressive state of mind. This melancholy is even worse, more insidious, and difficult to eradicate: it is only intellectual. It is not originally in me, but assaults me like a pitbull foaming with rage when I start to observe the world. However,

although it is foreign, it does not leave me in peace, and its exterior origin does not attenuate its internal effects. These things are, if one thinks about them well, inherently dark and they force us to look at them as they are; they are the ones that wear the veil. Consequently, melancholy—my melancholy—is not the result of a *pathological outpouring of the psyche*; it is the material itself from which the current world is composed. It is into this vortex that I plunged and where I was lost. It is into this vortex that I plunged and where I was lost many times. But I did not want to write here the simple subjective chronicles of my lamentations on an insane century. As I have said before, I am distrustful of everything, of pessimistic discourses on the state of the world, these easy sobs of a small, afflicted mind. I am neither sad nor beaten down. I have no nostalgia for the past (having known only this period, I don't idealize any *Golden Age* that is defined by a true and full sense of existence circulating among the members of a living community). And I do not tremble when thinking about the future, even if I should, given my situation; the future simply worries me as much as the present afflicts me. Having said this, I write not to pour out my pain, but to ward it off in its very articulation. For me, it therefore has to do with transforming my melancholy into an analytical tool in order to surpass it by dissecting its simple elements and by making it undergo the test of adequate reason. I refused to yield to it. I have no desire to rot in this pitiful state. The present exposition of my torments has no other goal than to escape them once and for all. But, in order to heal myself of this pernicious melancholy, it is still necessary that I truly experience it, that I examine all of its somber aspects, that I explore meticulously its smallest recesses.

EIRÍKUR ÖRN NORÐDAHL [ICELAND]

Poems from

Fist, or Crazy Words *Hnefi eða vitstola orð*

2013

Translated by the author

Prologue: The Crisis Sonnet

IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF!
OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG!
OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG!
IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF!

IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF!
OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG!
OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG! OMG!
IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF! IMF!

FME! FME! FME! FME! FME! FME! FME! FME! FME! FME!
FIT! FIT! FIT! FIT! FIT! FIT! FIT! FIT! FIT! FIT!
LOL! LOL! LOL! LOL! LOL! LOL! LOL! LOL! LOL! LOL!

FME! FME! FME! FME! FME! FME! FME! FME! FME! FME!
FIT! FIT! FIT! FIT! FIT! FIT! FIT! FIT! FIT! FIT!
LOL! LOL! LOL! LOL! LOL! LOL! LOL! LOL! LOL! LOL!

Note: While most of the acronyms above are used internationally, some are specifically Icelandic. FIT denotes overdraft fees and FME stands for the Financial Surveillance Authority.

X.

You are spongy roads
paved to the ankles

Repulsed I pull the swines
from my neighbour's piggy-bank

to the garden for grilling

X.

The shipwrecks of reformed times
turned out to be conquered fowls.

The refrigerator is empty!
The washing machine!

I wish for rococomilk!

X.

Do you accept transfer tickets?
Could you charge this to my account?
Are pennies also crowns?
Can we perhaps reach an agreement?

My right titty for a liter of milk!
My kingdom for Camel Filters!

(oh, why are pennies crowns?)

X.

We are what we eat
We gobble what we become
We eat what we gobble
We are what we become

X.

Turn on the lights, it's dark

Fears insolvency & fears collection proceedings & fears demands on estate & fears government collectors & fears unsuccessful attachment & fears & fears & fears creditors & fears modern mendicancy & fears to render unto caesar the things which are caesars & fears for instance attachment of property & fears insolvency measures & fears the order of debts & fears the administrator & fears a fire-sale & fears moratorium & fears mortgaged collateral & fears & fears & fears registered property mortgage deeds & fears the legal status of guarantors & fears debtees & fears fiscal movements & fears over-heating & fears inflation & fears a business deficit & fears & fears & fears a fiscal deficit & fears currency risk & fears pegged exchange rate systems & fears an increase in lending & fears default & fears for instance unemployment & fears depreciation & fears credit fines & fears the quarterly settlement & fears loss of expenditure & fears collection & fears payment behaviour & fears & fears & fears the battle about Iceland's image

Turn off the lights, it's time for bed

X.

Open the window, it's warm

Desires gold premium & desires payment service & desires frequent flyer programs & desires a future account & desires three-way savings & desires additional pension savings & desires equity management & desires & desires & desires profit protection & desires student premium & desires to design one's own charge card & desires the cairn-club & desires for instance income protection & desires additional coins & desires regular savings & desires equity pensions & desires pillar-accounts & desires star-accounts & desires market-accounts & desires & desires & desires bargain-accounts & desires future-accounts & desires family accounts & desires fund management & desires for instance high-interest internet-accounts & desires financial custody accounts & desires credit rating & desires additional perks & desires a discount on borrowers cost & desires free financial education and consulting & desires for instance a roomier overdraft & desires direct access to a service representative & desires & desires & desires payment distribution & desires a children's account & desires to have a worry-free old age

Close the window, it's cold

X.

Power, peace, freedom, yawn

Energy, wealth, foresight, yawn

Speed, courage, truth, yawn

Optimism, bravery, experience, yawn.

Grumble, rumble, wail, whine.

X.

The television will not be televised
The television will be live yawn
the revolution I was about to get to that
the revolution will initially be rerun and it will
also be available yawn online in a so-called live-stream

Download and distribution not allowed. You wouldn't steal a car.

X.

A walk-up for walking up

A walk-through for walking through

A walk-about for walking about

A walky-talky for talking walky

X.

All out of bada bing
Only bada boom left
Only boom, bada boom
Bada bada boom

X.

Shallows the tides
sinking fluctuations
freetail batmaggot

X.

Rent-a-serf with rubber-handles
indexed moaning
longer, deeper, more

X.

Endurendurendure
endurendure the wonder
and marvel and thunder
sand built on land
sinking on shores
winds row and grounds heal
distended diaphragms of the breathless
singing capitals of letters
There will be no conditions
made or provisos of words
the world is costless
for those who make bold and
shop

In the distance the sound
of ancient loans overdue

X.

Stocks gaping over
the grooves of the perplexed
it bleeds with ease from pockets
lined with photographs of
vikings in all sorts of swashbuckling
tight spots of unsavage images
crying darlings at our likenesses
in nonstop scuffles with
walls of garages
so that the members
of the farmer party
most honourable
will stand frightened

On blogs the cussing of Pound
and the shrieking of Lorca

JOSÉ ANTONIO FRANCÉS [SPAIN]

‘Second-hand Clothes’ ‘Ropa Vieja’

From the flash fiction anthology *Desahuciados. Crónicas de la Crisis*

2013

Translated by Megan Berkobien

I recognized my jacket by its plaid elbow patches. It took some time to realize that the homeless man had found those garments at the local parish, where my wife donated our old clothing with charitable regularity.

Another day it was my sweatshirt with Naranjito on it. The big, smiling orange with a soccer ball appeared grotesque on that unfortunate man. The whole matter began to bother me when several acquaintances claimed to have seen me in the trashcans at the market.

I often happened upon him in the park while walking the dog. From afar, he seemed an annoying imitation of an ungainly and unsuccessful “me.” That apparition of my failure left me in disagreeable spirits. Several times I remained there, attempting to draw closer, to take an interest in his story. Perhaps his family had left him on account of unpardonable weaknesses, or he had lost it all in one stroke of luck: an illness, an eviction... Maybe he was just another victim of the devastating crisis that was destroying everything in its path.

It was a bothersome revelation when one afternoon he appeared in the square with my sky-blue Bermuda shorts, and so I approached him. Since then I can hardly put together what happened. That haze of unconnected images: defenseless cigarette butts, a vacant window, bits of memories like mounds of old clothing...

In the shelter, no one wants to tell me where my family is or why those strange people now live in my house. I only have these ridiculous Bermuda shorts and futureless days in which to relinquish myself to the solitude of walks through the park, and those distant, sympathetic looks.

MARKO POGAČAR [CROATIA]

‘A Dream of the Bottom’ ‘San o dnu’

From the short story collection *Bog neće pomoći*

2012

Translated by Tomislav Kuzmanovic

I have a fear of right angles. The room in which I'm lying – and I'm lying because for a while now I cannot get up – is a rectangle of crudely cut logs filled with a multitude of rectangles made of the same timber matter, some a bit smaller, some so tiny you can take them into your hand.

It's difficult to say with certainty whether I'm not getting up because I can't, or if it is because of the complete absence of desire for an upright position, or, perhaps, for the fear of forming a right angle with the ground. In any case, I've been aligned with it for days, the angle we make is a dead angle, as dead as I will be too, sooner or later. Days turn into weeks, weeks multiply into months, swarming like white mice out of my father's collar until they flood everything in front of them, cover the horizon, and take me from this world, bit by bit, in their tiny teeth. This, I believe, is a good thing because then I will finally, once and for all, become part of the ground, an inseparable portion of the bottom which, in one way or another, I've been scraping for quite some time.

My bed is set in such a way that, from it, I see as little as possible: only what I want to see and what I need to see. Thus the largest part of this immutable scene is made of a window whose edges are lined with clay – still cold and wet – brought from the banks of a frozen creek. By night, I see through the scratched glass half covered with a curtain and, by day, I feel my star, my guide, which, nestled on top of the highest chimney of a sugar plant, twinkling into the darkness, sends a Morse-coded message announcing the end; the message that only I can read. To my left, within reach on an overturned washbowl, stands an empty frame with a picture of my brother István, that is, what is left of the picture. The frame's edges, just like the window's, are lined with a thin layer of flattened clay. The list of what I wish to see ends here; my other wishes begin where the look ceases to have meaning, in that deep darkness I win for myself with my arduous wait.

Of what I must see, there's just a little more, but it makes me exceedingly more miserable. This mostly includes a piece of a table, a good portion of a northern wall, several dried pig heads on it, a cabinet with four drawers, and several crates placed under the hanger which contain my coat, rifle, and a pair of boots tied together with a wire. I have taken none of these into my hands for a long time now, the boots I don't

put on. The only thing I ever touch – and it requires me to stretch just a little – is a string-tied bundle of matches removed from their box. I use them, when the fog is too thick to see even a flicker of my star, to light a wick inserted into a glass jar of oil and, under this light, I then watch the face within that frame, dulled with wet clay.

My wishes are few and quite reasonable. They can, I believe, be brought down to just two, although each in itself, just as with any other wish, like my drawer cabinet, hides a secret compartment or two, some false bottom. I've already mentioned the first: the wish to reach that final bottom once and for all; to become one with it. The method I developed for this purpose is simple yet rather exhausting. It consists of a persistent, resolute self-deprivation of all cravings. According to the frequency of their occurrence they are: the craving for things edible, the craving for female flesh, the craving for someone else's fear, the craving for total humiliation of myself and others, the craving for death of small and swift animals, the craving for my own son, and so on. The persistency in recantation of the first, it is clear, will be the quickest and most reliable way to reach my goal. Insofar as my first and my second wish are not completely commensurable, it could almost be said that, in one segment, they completely cancel each other out. In order to write a letter to my brother, to finally compose a text I have been avoiding for years and to explain in it everything that is possible to explain, I need my hands, my head to be as clear as possible. The logic thus suggests that the wishes should be fulfilled in an orderly fashion. I've decided to put an end to its irksome implacability by executing my first wish as strictly as possible without it compromising the implementation of the second.

The fact that all this is possible, this mere vegetation, this horizontal semi-state between life and death whose only purpose is the wait, the wait for a letter to you, my brother, István, I owe that to an uncommon concatenation of circumstances. On my own I would not be able to endure this, and for a long period of time loneliness was my one and only, my everyday condition. Then, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, one day that was just a little less icy than others, Csaba Utz appeared at my house. I would not have even known it – by then I had already completely lost interest in the outside world – had the fellow not hesitatingly knocked on my door. That surprised me greatly. The villagers, those few

that dared to venture across the frozen heath that separated us, gave my house a wide berth. I could not blame them for this: I avoided them even more thoroughly. Satisfying one of my cravings, I even spat at them, which gave me great pleasure. If someone did take heart and appear at my door, it was back when, thanks to my rusty yet efficient traps, I still had a supply of dried pork and could offer it in exchange. I however was in want of few things so I mostly sent them off empty-handed across the heath. I never knew and I still don't know what made Csaba Utz appear at my threshold, but he did appear at the right moment. I owe all this to him; he is my scourer angel; only he stands between me and the bottom. That's why Csaba Utz is at the same time the object of my love and of my hatred.

I considered the day Utz entered my life one of my happiest days. Utz did not talk, he did not look me in the eye, but he – immediately and somewhat clumsily – took up the much-needed job of taking care of my long-neglected house. When, during a short period of reduced self-control, I spat on him with distinct pleasure, he behaved as if nothing had happened. That's when I thought my troubles had come to an end. Under my dictate, Utz would write a letter to you, István, my brother, and I, left alone in my loneliness, would abandon myself completely to the realization of my first and simplest wish; my soon-to-be encounter with the bottom. However, I was soon forced to give up on this plan. Even though Utz stopped by my house almost daily, bringing me leftovers of meals from who knows where and tending to my stench, the writing thing did not go well at all. Confronted with the stationary, he behaved waywardly, what's more, he showed a kind of fear of it. Taking this into consideration, in one of my longer deliriums, I even managed to get it into my head that Csaba Utz was the very son I had never had. I have since abandoned this idea.

Utz is also to be credited for the fact that I somehow managed to endure the stay in my own house. During the first days of his strange voluntary work, he understood the nature of my unusual yet intense fear. He disappeared and the very same afternoon came back loaded with four sacks of wet clay, which he had – who knows how? – managed to scratch from the banks of the frozen creek whose name I don't remember. He applied it to all the right angles and sharp edges within my sight, bringing

me, at the same time, to the immediate vicinity of what I wanted: numbness, dregs, bottom. The smell of moist soil filled the room completely and lingered on for days, while Utz stored the rest of the clay in sacks under my bed so that, whenever I wanted, I could get my hand into it and let it stick to my fingers, then bring it close to my nose, eyes, ears; chew on it, talk to it, plug my ears with it. It's worth mentioning that, even though from time to time I did address him, in all this time Utz never once sent a single word in my direction.

One day Utz appeared at my door in the evening, later than usual. I was lying in my spot in silence, observing the barely visible reflection of my only star, the pale proof of its existence dispersed in the droplets of low clouds. Only when he came closer and went down to check the contents of my chamber pot did I notice he was missing a couple of his front teeth. He never said anything about it, but I assumed that, on his way to my house, he ran into villagers who clubbed him almost to death. How had he managed to drag himself to my bed and stand in an upright position was beyond me.

But, exactly there, in that mute uprightness of his, lay the seed of my rebellion against Utz. Whatever was the source of his motivation, Utz was evidently keeping me alive. He controlled my self-deprivation of hunger, encouraged my hope in that letter, he even, occasionally, openly invited me to spit at him by turning the back of his head to me, offering me his hairy cheeks. I, however, was progressively losing hope in the letter. By no means would words leave my skull, let alone settle in the whiteness of the paper, even if for just a little while. That's why, on a day that was otherwise not special – except for that, after a long time, one of my cravings appeared again – I decided to end it with Utz. Only he, my scourer angel, now stood between me and the bottom.

The craving I mentioned, and it had appeared earlier that day, was the craving for the female flesh; the craving that, due to my physical exhaustion, had been avoiding me lately. I had just opened my eyes and, my head sunken in my feathery pillows, I made an effort to follow the movements of a wasp that was right above my forehead building a nest by spit-gluing together the discarded pieces of its own entrails.

It was still too early for Utz, however, some restlessness between my legs snapped me awake from a somewhat somnambular concentration on the wasp and a nonchalantly invented mantra directed at the wasp's failure and fall. No matter how hard I tried to prove myself the opposite, something was undoubtedly happening down there; with its magnetic strength something was drawing what was left of my blood from my body and growing tense, unmistakably cloaking itself with space too large for it. For a while I tried to resist this well-known – albeit somewhat forgotten – urge by keeping my eye on the wasp and repeating the mantra under my breath: *fall down, crush, fall down, vanish, fall down, crush, fall padme hum...* But my body, despite its strength ebbing away, was stronger than my mind.

In disbelief I watched as an indestructible right angle, completely independent from my will, emerged on me; an internal rebellion against the integrity of my being. It got too bright to see the star; out of my brother István's picture frame, only cracked glass and sodden paper observed me; everything in this world finally turned against me.

At that moment, the one responsible for this damned condition, my scourer, the instigator of my cravings, the angel of the bottom – Csaba Utz – walked into the house. As always, he was completely silent, and I didn't say anything either. I let him approach my bed and check the chamber pots. And then, pretending that I wanted him to put ointment on the wounds on my back, I opened the thick deposits of my blankets. Resolved to, once and for all, put an end to everything, I violently bit into my own tongue, grabbed Utz by his nape, and slammed him throat first onto the axis of the cruel angle above my legs. Suddenly some unusual strength awoke in me and Utz, predictably, did nothing to flee, save or defend himself from this sly attack. For a while, he made sounds similar to those of a fish taken out to the dry land, a barely noticeable gurgle, and then he went limp and grew completely silent. With him that angle died forever, too.

I pushed the flaccid body away and, feeling completely exhausted, somehow managed to get back under my blankets. That wasp

was still oozing the pieces of itself and gluing them with its spit into a home of some future death, but I barely managed to catch a glimpse of it. Completely immobile, in a state that could hardly still be called a life, my eyes wide open, I stared at the clay in the frame of the window, the clay in the frame without a picture of my brother. Only moments now, I know it, separate me from the ground; between me and that clay, between me and the bottom there is nothing. In the cataract that thickens and clouds my eyes, I discern the river of time; through its murky water now I see, in absolute clearness, the runny and still bottom; the mud that, silent, with its toothless mouth chews on the final vertical. The light falls onto the water under an odd, completely unreal angle, and I cannot tell whether it comes from the sun, the candle, or from my only star. For a moment, the surface seems to burn, the space thickens, the flare bobs on light waves. And then that light vanishes too.

GINÉS S. CUTILLAS [SPAIN]

‘The Invisible Doorway’ ‘El portal invisible’

From the flash fiction anthology *Desahuciados. Crónicas de la Crisis*

2013

Translated by Megan Berkobien

For Elena Gené

After wandering around the city in search of work, I returned home to find that doorway number four—my own—had disappeared.

I attempted to separate apartments two and six with my fingers, to see if it was hiding there in between, but the walls mocked me with their stubborn immobility. I decided to walk up the street from the other side to catch it unawares. I circled the block and emerged from the opposite corner, running and screaming, trying to take it by surprise, but the only thing I got was a bucketful of water dumped from above by some former neighbor.

Now, five years later, I still live on the streets, lying in wait. Always close to apartment number four. I know that it's there and that one day it will reappear. While it's making up its mind, I caress the key. I hope that, at the very least, they've had the courtesy not to change the lock.

TARAS FEDIRKO [UKRAINE]

There is Nothing There Нічого немає

2014

Translated by Jessica Zychowitz

Whoever can, leaves this place.
A flag on a hill—is all that remains in one's memory,
the emptied carcass of a Leviathan,

rose-colored flesh of sky, hardened clay
over a lake.

A cruel presence one must adapt to.

Going away, they carry nothing with them,
one after the other, their windows go dark.

The body pulses as if one solid muscle,
writhing out from a net of hands, moving
to tear itself apart—

nakedness and banality—
it is as if the two, screwing before the whole village, are one and the same
to its onlookers
(whispering: 'What *greater* purpose can there be in the lives of those who stay?').

In the October twilight the Seret is aflame with burning reeds, nests. A seagull flies
over the heads of those who ignited this, who remain, looking on—
a sign?

Bareness as a metaphor for pain: the long-suffering, beheaded body of the nation
and the nation's blossom—'a guelder rose bent toward the ground,' they write
in letters home, 'only ten euros and they'll
publish my opinion in the paper.'

For those who have left the ashes, the world has sped up.
"Wives leave their children and husbands, God will punish them,
God has punished us,'
time is up.

The world turns on stilts of arrogance, ignorance—blessed are those who, not knowing,
return. A new world of pleasure is spun by those who remain
beyond the horizon.

The levers of this verse, too, are thrust into their flesh—
this is what makes my gravity and tragedy possible: it's not compassion, but contempt,
the twilight of Europe,
in which those in the other world still believe there is a dawn. They won't find out,
they won't believe it—

they'll say a poet populates their possessed bodies with ghosts,
flesh bursting with voices, straining, twisting,
and one word will miss its mark—a word possessed with power that grinds up what
is beyond

 a word's reach
at the millstone of metaphors—
'truth.'

Tell me, o Muse.

'Beyond a wide field of grain'—a sea of highrises overtakes the BAM district.
(speechlessness, night, crossing of the world). A stream of concrete shot out into
the dark.

There are people who will not survive, people who survive because they were 'left
behind,'
and then there are people who thrive, preying on both.

Mothers and fathers atone ('Hedonism in the heart of the provinces!').
Ternopil expands outward,
growing over the ravines, walls
to which 'those who return' will one day pray.

Each time that I return—there is nothing.

February 2, 2013

In the motionless heart of August,
when the stone starts to cool,

up close (as I count aloud to fifty)
that which we are seeking
is looking right at us.

The sun dives deep, over the ridge in Hlybochok
into a net of streets,
(like a withheld breath released into the dead air of a small room—
an alley window between buildings, the sound of a siren
and this space into which arms reach outward—
and the hum of Chicago—the bustling night—
I swallow, again and again).

That we are looking,
means nothing here.

A windy place—
and then she moves, losing her balance,
through the room to the window behind the corn, full of weeds,
she does not see me open the gate—

the stalks of dill and goosefoot are swaying,

‘I keep searching,’ I say, ‘but this doesn’t mean anything.’

August 18, 2013

Past the bend in the road,
at daybreak—
hawthorn, quitch, and blackthorn,
the road between the bare maples descends at a sharp slant.

It's windy here too;
an underwater shadow, spreads out its arms,
glides over the riverbed of the Seret: autumn days
sailing past—like wild creatures returning out of the blue.

'If a person broke like cast iron,'
I read—
random names—
broken bodies that the turbid night
would carry onshore.

November 10, 2013

When the hunter's footsteps melt away with the snow,
how will you hunt the hunter?

Things abandoned at the border
can only speak of
fear in the face of fear

and rage—
the fear of belonging to another.

But fear, like the sea, is already closing in
on the bay, thrashing around,

and all around—only fields, a wide sea.

The tracks left by the hunter melt away with the snow.

March 15, 2014

Don't rock the boat, they say
don't show your palms—

along the middle current of the Seret
all is quiet.

In this brave new family,
no one recognizes anyone, they say.

Tell your future on the first bird
that crosses the river before the tide
moving down its throat,
reaches its muddy mouth:

on this far southern shore
the wave has arrived

It is still quiet here.

March 24, 2014

SPECIAL FEATURE
ABSINTHE IN ITS SECOND DECADE

In 2003, the very first issue of this publication—then known as *Absinthe : New European Writing*—opened with a series of poems translated by Adam J. Sorkin, one of the most prominent and prolific translators of Romanian and Moldovan literature in the English-speaking world. Sorkin has since been a frequent contributor to the magazine.

As the next chapter opens for *Absinthe*—bringing a new subtitle, *A Journal of World Literature in Translation*, and a new home at the University of Michigan—the new team of editors wished to show their commitment to honoring the legacy established by founding editor Dwayne Hayes and decided to emphasize, in a special feature, the continuity between *Absinthe*'s previous and current incarnations. They invited Adam J. Sorkin to choose a recent translation of his to close the present issue. He generously replied to the invitation and selected a few poems by Romanian-Canadian author Diana Manole.

DIANA MANOLE [ROMANIA]

Poems from

B & W

2013

Translated by Adam Sorkin and the author

No Title. Just a Scream

I'd burn Rome again
(like Nero desperately seeking to quench his thirst
for absolute beauty)
and the University of Bucharest Library
(like the Romanian communists during the 1989 revolution,
trying to vanquish the past
that stained both victims and executioners
book by book, along with the *Securitate* archives
hidden in the basement),
if that would finally erase your poems
from my memory –
words baying the pain of another race and
your love for other women
pouring over me –
cement about to harden and turn me to stone
from the inside out.

Adrenaline. Rush

After you kiss me
I can't eat, drink, sleep, move,
breathe.

I'm frozen in a moment in time which envelops me
like a cocoon,
drops of blood roiling saliva,
drops of sweat spoiling tears.
'A poor-caliber Caliban, four-eyed and two-tongued.'
(Sometimes images migrate from poem to poem
against my will.)
I spell out in amazement the difference between
lust and love
on a roundtrip between here and hell.

'I learned it the hard way,' you mutter
your lips still stuck to mine,
your thoughts wound tight around my thoughts
like grapevines spiraling around the canes,
your eyes burning with a primitive joy
that withers me like X-rays
and condemns me to bread—crusts—and—bilge—water
from dawn to dusk!

Colonizing. Stories

Friends from all over the world question my right
to tell stories of another race
but I stubbornly keep writing about you,
writing in silence in tacky two-star hotels rooms
in the two hemispheres.

 You carve words directly in your skin
 like a monk performing acts of penance
 for the sins of others.

 The blood,
 in suspicious stains
 that you got used to not seeing,
 dripping like a Chinese water torture
 drop by drop into the pile of the carpet,
 changing you from victim
 to self-executioner.

 The pain spreads through the air
 with the lusty smell of African flowers
 still waiting to be catalogued by
 the Royal Horticultural Society.

Your syllables slip into my syllables,
inseminating them,
an intercourse that lacks the least tenderness
like an in vitro fertilization where the end justifies
the means –
one wriggling sperm chosen randomly
from the plastic cup
penetrates the egg against its own will.

 You write
 hunchbacked over the table
 full of wonder
 like a first-grader still struggling to understand
the meaning of each letter.
When the angel comes, his color doesn't matter.

AUTHORS

Born in 1967, French writer and philosopher **Bruce Bégout** teaches at the University of Bordeaux. He is the author of several works of fiction and numerous essays. Over the past decade, an important part of his work has explored iconic urban and periurban spaces in the United States. Two volumes of his non-fiction work [*Zeropolis : The Experience of Las Vegas and Common Place: The American Motel*] have appeared in English translation.

María do Cebreiro was born in 1976. She is the author of several books of poetry—including *I Am Not From Here*, translated into English—as well as of scholarly work on Galician literature. She teaches literary theory at the University of Santiago de Compostela, in Galicia.

Barcelona-based **Álex Chico**, born in 1980, is the author of several volumes of poetry and has contributed articles of literary criticism to a large number of Spanish-language publications.

Greek author, translator and photographer **Christos Chrysopoulos**, born in 1968, has received several awards, both in Greece and internationally, for his fiction and non-fiction works. A graduate of the Iowa International Writers Program, he teaches creative writing in Athens and is the founder and director of DASEIN, Athens International Literary Festival.

Ginés S. Cutillas, born in 1973, is one of the most prominent exponents of the *microrelato*, the Spanish term for flash fiction. His texts have been included in a various anthologies devoted to the genre. He is also a noted literary critic.

Ukrainian poet **Taras Fedirko** is currently a Ph.D. student in social anthropology at Durham University. He has published articles in English on contemporary Ukrainian politics and is the co-editor of *Prostory*, a literary magazine published in Kyiv.

Born in 1968, Spanish writer **José Antonio Francés** is the author of two novels, several volumes of short stories, and of a large number of works for young readers.

Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, born in 1978, is a prolific poet and novelist from Iceland. His work has received several awards in his home country. He is also known for his poetic and conceptual performances, as well as for his much-lauded Icelandic translations of, among others, Allen Ginsberg's poems and Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn*. *Fist, or Crazy Words* is his sixth book of poetry. Some of Eiríkur's texts have appeared in English-language literary journals.

Croatian author **Marko Pogăčar** was born in 1984. He studied Comparative Literature and History at the University of Zagreb and collaborates with various literary magazines in Croatia. His poems have been translated into several languages and have appeared in *Absinthe* in the past.

Spanish writer, literary critic and translator **José Antonio Masoliver Ródenas** was born in 1939. He has published several novels and short story collections in Castilian, as well as poems in Catalan. He taught creative Spanish and Latin American literature, as well as creative writing in the United Kingdom and in Spain. In the United States, selections from his work were featured in *Words Without Borders*.

Romanian writer, broadcaster, theatre director, and scholar, **Diana Manole** has published eight books and won fourteen literary awards. Since immigrating to Canada, her poetry [both translated from Romanian and written directly in English] has appeared in *The Nashwaak Review*, *Maple Tree Literary Supplement*, *Poem*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Third Wednesday*, *untethered*, *Grain*, among others. Her translations of English and American poetry have been published in several literary magazines in Romania. She teaches at Guelph University and Trent University and resides in Toronto, Ontario.

Daniel Salgado works as a journalist. He is the author of six books of poetry. He has translated Allen Ginsberg and Adrienne Rich into Galician, and is a member of the electronic music group Das Kapital.

Born in 1970, **Care Santos** lives in Barcelona. She is the author of several novels, short story collections, volumes of poetry, as well as children's books. Her work has been translated into seven languages and has appeared in *Words Without Borders* in the United States.

German poet **Katharina Schultens** was born in 1980 and currently lives in Berlin. She is the author of three volumes of poetry.

Gonçalo M. Tavares, born in 1970, was described by Nobel-Prize laureate José Saramago as the most important Portuguese writer of his generation and is one of the leading voices in contemporary European and world literature. His extremely large body of work has been translated in over 45 countries, including in the United States where the installments of his 'Kingdom' series have been particularly well received.

TRANSLATORS

Neil Anderson teaches at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. His translations from Galician and Spanish have appeared in *Asymptote*, *Shear-mans Magazine*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *M-Dash*, among others.

Megan Berkobien is pursuing a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan. She worked as an assistant editor for *Asymptote*, among other editorial projects. Her translations have been featured in *Words Without Borders*, *Palabras Errantes*, and *Asymptote*, to name a few. She attempts to theorize new publishing forms. Her first book-length translation—Cristina Peri Rossi's radiant novella *Strange Flying Objects*—is forthcoming from Ox and Pigeon in 2015.

Tomislav Kuzmanovic is the translator of *The Death of the Little Match Girl* by Zoran Ferić and *A Castle in Romagna* [with Russell Valentino] by Igor Štiks. His translations of fiction and poetry and other writings have appeared in various publications in the U.S., U.K., Croatia and elsewhere, among others *Granta*, Ugly Duckling Presse's 6x6, *Iowa Review*, *Drunken Boat*, *New European Poets Anthology*, *Dalkey Archive's Best European Fiction*, etc. A graduate of Iowa's Translation Workshop, he works with the Festival of the European Short Story, Zagreb's Center for Creative Writing, and teaches literary translation at the University of Zadar, Croatia.

Will Stroebel is a Ph.D. candidate in Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan and a translator. His research focuses on modern and contemporary literature from Greece and Turkey, on theories of materialism, as well as on the history of the book.

Adam J. Sorkin is a translator of contemporary Romanian poetry. His work has been recognized with the Poetry Society Prize for European Poetry Translation, the Kenneth Rexroth Memorial Translation Prize, the Poesis Prize for Translation, and the Ioan Flora Prize for Poetry Translation, along with other awards in Romania and Moldova. He has published more than fifty books, most recently Rodica Draghinescu's *A Sharp Double-Edged Luxury Object*, George Vulturescu's *Gold and Ivy / Aur și iederă*, Marta Petreu's *The Book of Anger*, and Mihail Gălățanu's *The Starry Womb* [all in 2014, with co-translators]. He is Distinguished Professor of English at Penn State Brandywine.

David Swartz is a Canadian artist, writer and translator, currently living in Lisbon, Portugal. His work has appeared in the *Malahat Review*, *Vallum Magazine*, *Nod Magazine*, *Broken Pencil*, *The Prairie Journal*, *The New Quarterly*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Ascent Aspirations*, and *Pinyon Magazine*.

Silke-Maria Weineck is Professor of German Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan. She works on the long history of figuration. Her translations of Rilke have appeared in the *American Poetry Review*. Her most recent scholarly book, *The Tragedy of Fatherhood : King Laius and the Politics of Paternity in the West* was published in 2014 by Bloomsbury.

Shannon K. Winston is a translator, poet, and poetry critic. Her work has appeared in *Her Circle Ezine*, *Zone 3*, *Two Review*, and *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*. Her first full length poetry collection, *Threads Give Way* [Cold Press] was published in 2010. She recently completed her dissertation in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan and is currently a Lecturer at Princeton University's Writing Center. Her academic work examines the role of visuality in shaping literature from the French, Moroccan, Italian, and Algerian Mediterranean.

Jessica Zychowicz is a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Michigan in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures and an affiliate of the Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies and the Institute for Research on Women and Gender. She holds a B.A. in English Literature from the University of California Berkeley and served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ukraine [2005-2007]. She has recently published translations in *ProStory* and her academic research in *Anthropology of East Europe Review* and the *Journal for Ukrainian Politics and Society*.

EDITORS

Etienne Charrière received a BA and an MA in French in Modern Greek from the University of Geneva (Switzerland). Since 2009, he has been a doctoral student in Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, where his research is on the transnational rise of the novel in the late Ottoman Empire. Etienne translates from Greek, Armenian and English into French.

Emily Goedde received an MFA in literary translation from the University of Iowa. While at Iowa, she was co-editor of *exchanges*, an online journal of literary translation. She is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, where she researches Chinese poetry from the 1930s and 40s. Her work has been published in *91st Meridian*, *The Iowa Review*, *exchanges* and *Discoveries: New Writing from The Iowa Review* as well as in the anthology *Jade Mirror: Women Poets of China* (White Pine Press, 2013).

A NOTE ON THE TYPE

Electra, inspired by exemplars of the 15th and 16th centuries, was drawn by William Addison Dwiggins for Mergenthaler Linotype in the early 1930s. Dwiggins did not strive to replicate these earlier designs, but rather to create something fresh that evoked the vitality of the early 20th century. When released, Electra was described as having ‘energy like metal shaving coming off a lathe.’ The style and substance of Electra supports the content of *Absinthe* via a fusion of machine aesthetics with an inflection of the hand.

The display font used in the frontmatter is *Bell*, based on original types made by the punchcutter Richard Austin for the foundry of John Bell in the 1780s. This hot metal typeface, a contemporary of Electra, was released by Monotype in 1931. It stands as a stylistic bridge between the publication’s body copy and masthead.

Our redesign of *Absinthe* happens to be in sync with the release of a new character set, Blesk, from Samarskaya & Partners of Brooklyn, NY. This distinctly vivacious typeface has been inspired by mid-century paperback book lettering and is offered in various styles that can be combined into seven combinations. Blesk robustly raises the banner under which the journal will continue to roll forward.

do Cebreiro, María and Daniel Salgado. *A guerra*. Cangas do Morrazo: Barbantesa.
© 2013 Barbantesa

Ródenas, Juan Antonio Masoliver. 'Villa Intempérie' from the flash fiction anthology *Desahuciados. Crónicas de la Crisis*. © 2013 Ediciones Traspíés

Chrysosopoulos, Christos. Excerpts from *Φακός στο στόμα*. Athens: Ekdoseis Polis.
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Chico, Álex. 'Las formas del camaleón' from the flash fiction anthology *Desahuciados. Crónicas de la Crisis*. © 2013 Ediciones Traspíés

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Schultens, Katharina. Poems from *gorgos portfolio. Gedichte*. Berlin: kookbooks.
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Bégout, Bruce. Excerpts from 'Chroniques mélancoliques d'un vendeur de roses ambulant' in the short story collection *L'accumulation progressive de la noirceur*. Paris: Editions Allia. © 2014 Editions Allia

Norðdahl, Eiríkur Örn. Poems from *Hnefi eða vitstola orð*, Reykjavík: Mál og Menning © 2013 Mál og Menning

Francés, José Antonio. 'Ropa Vieja' from the flash fiction anthology *Desahuciados. Crónicas de la Crisis*. © 2013 Ediciones Traspíés

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Cutillas, Ginés S. 'El portal invisible' from the flash fiction anthology *Desahuciados. Crónicas de la Crisis*. © 2013 Ediciones Traspíés

Fedirko, Taras. *Нічого немає*. © 2014 Taras Fedirko

Manole, Diana. Poems from *B&W*. © 2013 Diana Manole

ABSINTHE's Spring 2015 issue, entitled *Pen And Brush*,
will feature literature and art that draws from (and develops) cultural
conversations between Europe and East Asia.

In the meantime, please check our website for news and exclusive online content.

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ABSINTHE

PRECARIOUS EUROPE :
WRITING IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

PRECARIOUS EUROPE WINTER 2015

ABSINTHE 21

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