

THE **Queer** RIVETER

RIVETING WRITING FROM **EUROPE**

Edition Six, June 2019

FREE



Two red leather gloves are shown against a black background. The gloves are positioned one above the other, with the top glove slightly offset to the left. They have a smooth, glossy finish and visible stitching along the seams. The lighting highlights the texture and color of the leather.

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THE RIVETER

Queer

INTRODUCTION BY WEST CAMEL, EDITOR

We have successfully published five editions of *The Riveter* magazine, each devoted to a particular language, country or region, and now, for our sixth issue, we are changing direction and celebrating queer European literature. This category might at first seem nebulous, but we believe it brings into sharp focus many of the issues currently facing Europe. And being a gay man, a European, and a queer writer myself, it is a category that is close to my heart.

In the UK it is easy to forget that Brexit is not a peculiarly British phenomenon, but a manifestation of populist trends that have emerged across Europe. My thinking in commissioning the content for this *Riveter* was that an examination of queer writing might offer insights into the effects of this development. I wondered, for example, whether the experiences and observations of LGBT+ writers would help readers understand how the growth of the far

right and of anti-immigration sentiment and policies have affected patterns of migration across Europe.

But what is meant by 'queer' writing? In a bid to offer a clearer definition *The Riveter* team engaged author and journalist Paul Burston, founder and host of *Polari*, the UK's premier queer literary salon, and founder and judge of the *Polari Book prizes*. I agree with both Paul and our guest poetry editor – publisher, poet and translator Lawrence Schimel – who demonstrate that queer literature can encompass writing about queer issues by authors who may or may not be queer, as well as writing by queer authors on any topic – queer or universal. While this suggests a very broad church – one we've endeavoured to display through the wealth of content in this magazine – we think it also serves as a lens through which to examine the contemporary European moment.

The book I've reviewed for the magazine is Finnish-Kosovan author

Pajtim Statovci's *Crossing*. Following the experiences of two queer Albanians as they leave their troubled country and struggle to find a place in the West, this novel is, for me, the perfect example of how the 'queer eye' does more than offer a new view on fashion and styling, but highlights, clarifies and amplifies the obstacles and difficulties faced by all immigrants – and all those living between cultures.

Poet and translator Anna Blasiak (ELNet's literature coordinator and *The Riveter's* production editor) explores exactly these issues in her discussion with fellow poet Maria Jastrzębska. Both Polish poets living in the UK, their queer identities give extra definition to the experience of living across borders, at a time when attempts to harden and reinforce those borders are gaining strength.

The forces that have prompted these populist and nationalist trends are examined in fine detail by Masha Gessen in *The Future is History*, her book about modern Russia, reviewed here by Jennifer Sarha. And once again, specifically queer issues offer a way to understand the bigger picture.

Even the difficult relationship between a father and his queer son offers insights into the protectionist, insular feelings that have given populism a foothold: Paul Burston's review of Édouard Louis's *Who Killed My Father* highlights the links between the post-industrial experience of the French working-class male, and the violence some of those males mete out to queer people.

Testo Junkie, Spanish/French Paul B. Preciado's account of a pharmacologically aided transition from female to male, reviewed in this magazine by Jacky Collins, gives us a view on another type of border-crossing, and of in-between identities. Yelena Moskovich, the Ukrainian playwright and novelist, in her essay for us examining queer modes of expression, suggests that the prevailing populism demands a new, clearer aesthetic approach – one that should encompass Preciado's experience, and that of the many people, queer and otherwise, whose lives have been changed by the political upheavals of recent decades.

Attempting to encompass queer experience is something Lawrence Schimel reflects on in his essay introducing his poetry section. For example, finding a trans poet translated into English was a challenge for him. Once again, queer experience acts like a lens, offering a clearer view on all our experiences of transitioning from one language, one place or one gender to another.

We have a wealth, almost an embarrassment, of poetry in *The Queer Riveter*, including an exclusive. I was delighted when the prize-winning Polish writer Jacek Dehnel's offered us the first publication of the English translation of his poem 'Timepiece', written for Jacek's mother-in-law. Jacek and his husband had to travel from Poland to the UK in order to get married; and the structure of 'Timepiece', which is presented in the form of a Catholic

prayer, offers our readers yet another example of how 'queering' literature – illuminating a specifically queer issue – throws a different light onto the more universal experience.

Icelandic crime writer Lilja Sigurðardóttir does the same. In her essay, she discusses how important it was for her as a child to see lesbians represented in literature – even when that representation was negative. And in her own work – we have an extract from one of her novels in the magazine – we discover flawed, compromised characters, whose deficiencies speak more universally than perfection could.

This selection of queer writing, we believe, offers a broad but clearly defined picture of Europe's current moment. It is Europe seen through queer eyes; but we would like you all to enjoy the view, its queerness illuminating things differently, picking out the unseen details.

Thanks to all those who have helped us paint this scene: our contributors; our Riveter-in-Chief Rosie Goldsmith; our photographer

Lisa Kallou, and of course our resident poet and production editor Anna Blasiak. And finally, at the end of this issue, you can read an extract from my first novel, *Attend* – on Rosie's special request. For, after her final edit of the magazine, Rosie said to me: 'West, there's only one thing missing: as our resident Queer European Editor, we need an extract of your fiction!' I'm happy to oblige...

Enjoy *The Queer Riveter*. And however you describe yourself, whichever European country, culture or language you inhabit, whether you consider yourself one of our queer family, or another tribe, or the broader human family we are all members of, do respond with your own 'queer' thoughts, feelings and fiction.

West Camel



THE RIVETER

EDITORIAL

BY PAUL BURSTON, GUEST EDITOR

WHAT IS QUEER WRITING?

What do we mean when we talk about queer writing? As a gay reader, author, editor and journalist, this is a question that has concerned me for much of my life. Once upon a not-so-distant time, 'queer' was a derogatory term meaning 'male homosexual'. In the days before the Stonewall riots – which took place fifty years ago this summer – queer books tended to be those written by and about gay men, and usually revolved around sex. John Rechy was unashamedly queer. So were Jean Genet and many of the writers who formed the post-war, pre-lib queer literary canon.

Then came the 1970s gay liberation movement and the 1980s golden age of gay publishing – again, dominated



Paul Burston @ Kristina FitzGerald-Kovacs

by books about gay men. In the early 1990s, 'queer' was reclaimed as part of a noisy new wave of activism arising from the AIDS crisis. 'Gay' was dismissed as too polite for such desperate time, too well behaved, too narrow. 'Queer'

Paul Burston is the author of six novels including the WH Smith bestseller *The Black Path* and his latest, *The Closer I Get*. His journalism has appeared in the *Guardian*, *The Times*, *Time Out* and many other publications. He is the curator and host of award-winning literary salon Polari, and founder of the Polari Book Prizes. For information about Polari and The Polari Prize see www.polarisalon.com.

was defiantly in your face, all embracing and wilfully disruptive.

Queer activists took to the streets and queer theory invaded academia. Spearheaded by people like the American gender theorist Judith Butler, queer theory posited the idea that queer culture didn't simply mean culture produced by and about lesbians and gay men. Anything and anyone could be queer – gay, straight, male or female. Queer was a way of interpreting the world, an alternative perspective open to all.

So where does this leave the notion of the queer writer? Since 2007 I've run Polari, a literary salon providing a platform for emerging and established LGBT+ literary talent. Some of the writers who've appeared at Polari identify as queer. Others don't. Some lesbians feel that they have little enough representation as it is, without being subsumed under a new 'inclusive' term. For them, 'queer' can feel a lot like erasure.

When we launched The Polari First Book Prize in 2011, there were lengthy discussions about what kinds of books should be eligible. Finally it was decided that LGBT+ characters

and themes were just as important as the writer's sexuality. Many LGBT+ authors write books without much in the way of queer content – and that's fine. But we felt it was our duty to shine a spotlight on those who do explore LGBT+ lives – and often struggle to get published as a result.

These days, more people are embracing queer as an identity. This has partly come about as trans politics have gained ground and a variety of gender identities and sexualities have become more visible. Certainly, this is reflected in the range of books submitted for the Prize, with more trans and self-identified queer writers entering today than in the Prize's twelve-year history.

This year we introduced a second prize for writers at any stage of their career, and again the volume and variety of submissions are extremely impressive. It's tempting to conclude that queer writing is in better shape now than it has been in decades. But please read on and judge for yourself.

Paul Burston

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YELENA MOSKOVICH

TIME FOR A NEW ELOQUENCE: EXPRESSION IN QUEER WRITING

‘I pardon all your sins, but two I can’t abide: you read poems in silence and kiss aloud’, wrote Sophia Parnok, the poet known as the Russian Sappho, in 1931. A daring queer writer of her time, she wrote openly about her (female) lovers in a unique style that was both independent of her Romantic predecessors in the ‘Golden Era’ of 19th-century Russia, as well as combining everyday language and playfulness with intense passions.



Yelena Moskvich © Ines Manai

Although Parnok’s quote may be an aphoristic wink at a bad kisser, within it lies a weightier reflection that might

also extend to queer presence in literature: where and how to affirm one’s sensuality through self-expression. It is a question of both a lyrical and political nature. By mischievously comparing poetic and prosaic forms of pleasure, Parnok also raises the issue of blatancy in one’s delight. Whereas the loud kisser is seen as uncultured, or lacking authentic depth in their practice, the silent poetry reader is seen as melodically restrained, lacking the capacity to experience the sublime. There is something quite queer in finding just

Yelena Moskvich was born in the former USSR and emigrated to Wisconsin with her family as Jewish refugees in 1991. Her plays and performances have been produced in the US, Canada, France, and Sweden. Her first novel *The Natashas* was published by Serpent’s Tail in 2016. She has also written for the *New Statesman*, *Paris Review* and *3:AM Magazine*, and in French for *Mixt(e) Magazine*.

the right tenor of expression, in part à la Gloria Steinem, where the personal is political (absolutely), but also where the demonstrative is sensitive.

Queer presence in literature has greatly evolved since Parnok's time, when homosexual sentiment had to be strictly implicit or symbolized, or cloaked with social or artistic affluence, or a bohemian demeanor. However, the structural changes that occurred between the East and the West at the end of the 20th century, including the fall of the Iron Curtain and the Soviet Union, incited significant immigration and cultural fluidity, which helped to cultivate a sense of unity and persistence across the global queer community.

Now, though, the current rise in populism, censorship, nationalistic

isolation and disregard for human rights, mean that queer writing across the East and the West has never before needed such acuteness and precision in terms of both form and lyricism.

LGBT+ writers have historically fought to maintain privacy and discretion around their queer identities in their creative work. While their literature has been important and has served us, and they deserve our gratitude, this 21st century of queer writers may have a different eloquence to labour over and legitimize. Perhaps Parnok's unforgivable sins are now our points of reference, as we conjure narratives of mouth-watering volume, compassionate confidence and lyrical abandon.

Yelena Moskovich



FROM **VIRTUOSO**
BY **YELENA MOSKOVICH** (SERPENT'S TAIL, 2019)

Fuck, we were teens and it was tough.

*

I got my period before Jana despite being as flat and skinny as a birch tree, so yeah I bragged a little. Then Jana got hers soon enough, right on her birthday, and our country, the former Czechoslovakia, split. I told Jana her ovaries burst and cracked our nation in two, ha ha. That New Year, people danced a little harder as the snow dusted down the black sky. Janka and I were both sitting under the table, our heads touching the top when we sat up straight, so we hunched and chatted and snubbed at anyone who told us that we were too old to sit under the table on New Year's Eve. All the adults were so involved with their own bodies, they danced with closed eyes, then Slavek's papka plugged in the strobe light that Slavek had got him, and everyone swivelled around the thick rays of white and yellow and green and blue.

I climbed out from under the table and stood there, wanting to run around their legs like the Malá Narcis that I was. I could feel it swelling up in me, I could have even given my pee trick a go, but that stunt was old news. Janka climbed out and stood next to me. She pulled out her hand and I reached it and took it. We were anonymous pillars, standing the test of time.

*

I followed my mamka into the shared kitchen and stood behind her until she turned around. Her eyes flashed.

'It's not what you think,' she said and began to feign rubbing a stain out of her dress, then stopped and looked up at me and said, 'If you must know, your *father* is going to die!' She took a breath and I kept looking at her, so she said, 'He is ill and he's going to die young and I will be left all alone.' Her eyes began to heat up, then she grabbed her skirt again and began rubbing, like sparking the fabric against itself.

'It's awful, *awful*, the diseases that climb into your body and putrefy the organs. You think it can't happen, or to someone else, or later, but it swells right up inside you, deep inside and makes room for itself until you're wheezing for mercy—' then she just stopped talking.

I knew what it was. My index finger was high and snug in my nostril, grabbing at something promising. She slapped my hand away from my face

and screamed, 'Don't pick your nose when I'm explaining death to you! Bože na nebi, Zorka, you're almost a woman!'

My nail scraped the inside of my nostril, and pulled out a ring of blood and some nose hairs.

My mamka looked at my finger, then at my face, then pulled me into her chest with a frantic grab, my forehead bumped into her collarbone.

Yeah, she was trying to hug me.

She began murmuring in her silky voice, 'Please, please, please, my love ... don't be weird.'

She let go of me and walked back towards the party. At the doorway, she stopped, two men shouted her name at the same time. She bent her knees and shook her ass, holding the sides of the door, then propelled herself forwards and was dancing inside the strobe-light colours that were tearing holes into the room. Everyone danced like bodies being resurrected in gun fire. I licked the blood off my finger and told Janka to come dance with me.

*

Politics got full of wonder, miraculous even, not knowing what would happen. Other things, we did know. Like my papka who was sick. We bought a grave ahead of time. Still the world kept on folding and unfolding, creasing itself this way or that, borders, agreements, yeah I was showing off the scars on my body to Janka, like guarded checkpoints I snuck myself past.

*

Maybe I'm not telling it right. Or when I hear myself describing Jana, I get sorta pissed off about it, like that's not right. I don't know how to make it sound like how it was, for us.

She was solid, Janka. She was my best friend.

*

I don't know what to do with History, the big one that belongs to all of us and my small one, like a keychain.

*

When I opened my eyes, we were already kissing. Maybe we were doing that the whole time. Janka's tongue was strong, I remember. I thought, wow, so that's where she keeps all her strength then. I remember it, strong, in my mouth.

PAJTIM STATOVCI

FROM *CROSSING* (PUSHKIN PRESS, 2019)
TRANSLATED FROM THE FINNISH BY DAVID HACKSTON



Pajtim Statovci © Pekka Holmström

I am a twenty-two-year-old man who at times behaves like the men of my imagination: my name could be Anton or Adam or Gideon, whatever pleases my ear at any given moment. I am French or German or Greek, but never Albanian, and I walk in a particular way, the way my father taught me to walk, to follow his example, flat-footed and with a wide gait, aware of how to hold my chest and shoulders, my jaw tight, as though

to ensure nobody trespasses on my territory. At times like this the woman within me burns on a pyre. When I'm sitting at a café or a restaurant and the waiter brings me the bill and doesn't ask why I'm eating alone, the woman inside me smolders. When I look for flaws in my dish and send it back to the kitchen or when I walk into a store and the assistants approach me, she bursts once again into flames, becoming part of a continuum that started at the moment we were told that woman was born of man's rib, not as a man but to live alongside him, at his lefthand side.

Pajtim Statovci is a Finnish-Kosovan novelist. He moved from Kosovo to Finland with his family when he was two years old. His first novel, *My Cat Yugoslavia*, published by Pushkin Press, won the prestigious Helsingin Sanomat Literature Prize. *Crossing* won the Toisinkoinen Literature Prize in 2016 and Statovci also won the 2018 Helsinki Writer of the Year Award.

Sometimes I am a twenty-two-year-old woman who behaves however she pleases. I am Amina or Anastasia, the name is irrelevant, and I move the way I remember my mother moving, my heels not touching the ground. I never argue with men, I paint my face with foundation, dust my cheeks with powder, carefully etch eyeliner around my eyes, fill in my brows, dab on some mascara and coif my lashes, put in a set of blue contact lenses to be born again, and at that moment the man within me does not burn, not at all, but joins me as I walk around the town. When I go into the same restaurant, order the same dish, and make the same complaint about the food the waiter does not take it back to the kitchen but tells me the meat is cooked just the way I asked, and when he brings me the check he watches me as if I were a child as I rummage in my handbag and pull out the correct sum of money, then disappears into the kitchen with a cursory *Thank you*. The man within me wants to follow him, but when I look at what I'm wearing, my black summer dress and dark-brown flats, I see that such behaviour would be inappropriate for a woman, and so I leave the restaurant and step out onto the street, where Italian men shout and whistle at me, at times so much that the man inside me curses at them in a low, gruff voice, and at that they shut up and raise their hands into the air as though they have come face-to-face with a challenger of equal stature.

I am a man who cannot be a woman but who can sometimes look like a woman. This is my greatest quality, the game of dress up that I can start and stop whenever it suits me. Sometimes the game begins when I pull on an androgynous garment, a formless cape, and step outside, and then people start making assumptions, they find it disconcerting that they don't know one way or the other, sitting on public transport and in restaurants, cafés, it irritates them like a splinter beneath their fingernail, and they whisper among themselves or ask me directly: *Are you a man or a woman?* Sometimes I tell them I am a man, sometimes I say I'm a woman. Sometimes I don't answer them at all, sometimes I ask them what they think I am, and they are happy to answer, as though this were a game to them too, they are eager to construct me, and once I've given them an answer order is finally restored to the world. I can choose what I am, I can choose my gender, choose my nationality and my name, my place of birth, all simply by opening my mouth. Nobody has to remain the person they were born; we can put ourselves together like a jigsaw.

But you have to prepare yourself. To live so many lives, you have to cover up the lies you've already told with new lies to avoid being caught up in the maelstrom that ensues when your lies are uncovered. I believe that

people in my country grow old beyond their years and die so young precisely because of their lies. They hide their faces the way a mother shields her newly born child and avoid being seen in an unflattering light with almost military precision: there is no falsehood, no story they won't tell about themselves to maintain the façade and ensure that their dignity and honour remain intact and untarnished until they are in their graves. Throughout my childhood I hated this about my parents, despised it like the sting of an atopic rash or the feeling of being consumed with anxiety, and I swore I would never become like them, I would never care what other people think of me, never invite the neighbours for dinner simply to feed them with food I could never afford for myself. I would not be an Albanian, not in any way, but someone else, anyone else.

At my weakest moments I feel a crushing sense of sorrow, because I know I mean nothing to other people, I am nobody, and this is like death itself. If death were a sensation, it would be this: invisibility, living your life in ill-fitting clothes, walking in shoes that pinch.

In the evenings I sometimes hold my hands out before me, clasp them together, and pray, because everybody in Rome prays and asks God to help them resolve difficult situations. A thing like that can catch on so easily, and so I pray that I might wake up the next morning in a different life, even though I don't even believe in God. I do, however, believe that a person's desire to look a particular way and behave in a certain manner can directly impact the breadth of a shoulder, the amount of body hair, the size of a foot, one's talent and choice of profession. Everything else can be learned, acquired— a new way of walking, a new body language, you can practice speaking at a higher pitch or dressing differently, telling lies in such a way that it's not lying at all. It's just a way of being. That's why it's best to focus on wanting things and never on what might happen once you've got them.

Pajtim Statovci

Translated by David Hackston

David Hackston is a British translator of Finnish and Swedish literature and drama. Notable recent publications include Kati Hiekkapelto's Anna Fekete series, Katja Kettu's *The Midwife*, Pajtim Statovci's *My Cat Yugoslavia* and Maria Peura's *At the Edge of Light*. In 2007 he was awarded the Finnish State Prize for Translation.

CROSSINGBY **PAJTIM STATOVCI**TRANSLATED BY **DAVID HACKSTON** (PUSHKIN PRESS, 2019)RIVETING REVIEW BY **WEST CAMEL**

At the heart of this assured and subtle novel is a mystery about identity – that of the protagonist and more broadly that of each of us, as queer people, straight people, Europeans and non-Europeans, as immigrants and as indigenous people.

Following the lives of two queer Albanians as they escape their home country to make new lives for themselves in the West, the first impression is that the novel is told from the first-person point of view of Bujar, who relates two parallel narrative threads: one tracing past events in Tirana as he and best friend Agim grow up and then start to plan their escape; the other following our narrator as he travels to Rome, Madrid, New York and Helsinki. Doubt begins to creep in, however, about the true identity of our narrator. In the very first chapter – an extract from which is published alongside this review – we find the narrator dissembling:

‘I am a man who cannot be a woman but who can sometimes look like a woman. This is my greatest quality, the game of dress up that I can start and stop whenever it suits me.’

This same narrator offers each new person he meets in the West

a different account of where he comes from, who he is. Sometimes he’s Italian; sometimes Spanish, and once, Turkish. He’s an actor, a student, a singer. Most importantly, sometimes he presents as a woman, sometimes as a man.

Back in Tirana, however, it is Agim, not Bujar, who has the talent for assuming new identities, who, for example, takes the lead when the pair claim to be related to a powerful gangster in order to buy a boat to cross the Adriatic. And it is Agim who, from an early age, presents as female. Does the fact that in the present day the narrator isn’t named suggest that it is Agim and not Bujar who is telling us this part of the tale?

Throughout *Crossing* identity is fluid. In the Albanian folktales Bujar’s father tells him, changes of persona are key – life is a series of transitions. In Finland, our narrator – is it Bujar? Is it Agim? – meets Tanja, who is transitioning from male to female, and hearing her story he ponders to himself:

'Why can't you simply decide to be a man or woman by wearing men's or women's clothing? ... Why can't everybody present themselves the way they want to? If I want to use a woman's name or a foreign name, I can simply say so and nobody will ask me to prove why.'

But back in Tirana, Agim claims he wears his mother's clothes not to assume an identity, but because he is female, not male. This experience is different from our narrator's, who is clear his queerness lies in his mutability – not just in terms of gender but in terms of nationality,

of his origins. Is this difference the key to our narrator's true identity?

What we realise as the novel progresses is that we never see Bujar and Agim together after their departure from Albania, and that in this moment – the 'crossing' of the title – we will find the solution to the book's central mystery.

However, we are not offered any trite 'solution' to the wider debate about gender identity. Instead *Crossing* deepens and broadens the discussion, perhaps suggesting that there is no issue to be solved, and doing so in an intelligent and moving way.

West Camel



MARIA JASTRZĘBSKA & ANNA BLASIAK

OUTSIDE AND INSIDE: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO POLISH POETS

Maria Jastrzębska was born in Poland but arrived in the UK in the 1950s at the age of four. Anna Blasiak arrived in the UK from Poland in 2003, age twenty-nine. Both women are poets, both are queer. In the following conversation (which they hold in English), they discuss the similarities and differences between their experiences as queer Polish poets in the UK.

Maria Jastrzębska: Anna, do you see writing as a political act?

Anna Blasiak: More and more so, the older I get. I write quite intuitively, without too much pre-thinking and planning, but I am beginning to see that it can be a useful political tool, and I need to use it as such. Of course there are triggers that have made me think like this, all those things happening in this country and in Poland, politically and, as a result, socially. I have written quite a few explicitly Brexit poems recently. And there will probably be more.

How about you Maria?

MJ: Well, I've always thought we are all accountable, which means as writers and artists too. When my first collection came out, years ago – a collaboration

Maria Jastrzębska was co-editor of *Queer in Brighton* (New Writing South 2014) and co-founded Queer Writing South. She translated Justyna Bargielska's *The Great Plan B* (Smokestack 2017). Her most recent collection is *The True Story of Cowboy Hat and Ingénue* (Cinnamon Press/Liquorice Fish 2018). She lives in Brighton.

Anna Blasiak is an art historian, poet and translator. She runs the European Literature Network with Rosie Goldsmith. She has worked in museums and a radio station and written on art, film and theatre.

Maria Jastrzębska © Deborah Price



Anna Biesek © Lisa Kellou



with visual artist Jola Ścicińska – my mother refused to go to the launch, because, she said, quote, it was ‘lesbijska propaganda’. And at the same time my local feminist bookshop in London refused to stock it, because, they said, it wasn’t feminist enough – not enough about women/lesbians for them! But there is a tension there. I also want to leave room for imagination and playfulness. That’s something I’m enjoying more and more.

AB: In your most recent book, *The True Story of Cowboy Hat and Ingenue*, there is a lot of playfulness and a lot of political engagement.

MJ: I don’t think they should be in opposition. There is your conscious intention and then there is some other process – call it intuitive or unconscious. You’ve got to make room for that other process, because if the authorial intention just bashes it on the head, it stifles the creativity.

AB: You grew up a Pole in Britain, feeling different. Another layer of being different is being queer. How did and how does this inform your writing?

MJ: I knew English people around me couldn’t see my world, couldn’t understand my language, our customs. To some extent that put us at odds; I felt under pressure to assimilate and I was bullied for being a foreign child. I’ve written a lot about growing up, but I didn’t set out to – it just happened that way. When I came out, that added a whole other layer. I was different not only within English society but also different within Polish society. It was the margins of the margins...

What about you? You came to England as an adult and then you came out. Does that influence your creativity?

AB: I’ve heard many stories about Polish queer people moving to the UK because they felt repressed in Poland, but that isn’t my story. Not just because I wasn’t out when I was still in Poland. It’s a complete coincidence that I came out while in

England. I think it was just my time and I happened to be in England. Often when you read my writing you would have to look very hard to find any sign of queerness.

MJ: Yet when I read your poetry I get the sense that you are grappling with being outside and inside, you are looking at things from the outside, as a foreigner in the UK, and also looking at things from within both the UK and Polish contexts.

AB: I believe that when you move from one place to another you are forever misplaced. You don't belong to the place where you came from and you don't belong to the place you ended up in. It's always one leg here, one leg there. That can be hard, of course, but it's also an interesting position to be in. And I think you can use it creatively. There's nothing you can do about it, anyway. It's done, and you can't undo it. I've gone through it a few times in my life. And I love it. I don't have to feel that I belong to one place, I don't have to have one community, I don't have to fit into one box. It's actually great to have this feeling of not belonging, or rather belonging to a few places, a few boxes at the same time. I would never ever go back to Poland. Not just because of the current political situation, although that is a very big reason. I would rather pack my bags and go somewhere else, start from scratch, create another layer of not belonging again.

MJ: Yes, we inhabit in-between places and being between here and elsewhere is always fertile ground for creativity. It doesn't necessarily mean that we have to distance ourselves, be snooty outsiders. We can be excited or committed to our cultures 100 per cent, but it means that we are not 100 per cent in one or the other culture. Or we are and we are not. There is a paradox here. When people say to me, are you Polish or English? I think it's a false binary. Like you, I'm absolutely passionate about and fascinated by borders, and, particularly in Europe, with borders you can cross on foot – palpable, visible and yet at the same time sheer nonsense. That fascinates me and very much informs my writing. Growing up I was aware of different worlds not managing to communicate, so communication became hugely important to me. You and I both work as literary translators – but I have always been a cultural translator. I can't help myself. It's this sense that you are in one world in which people can't see and can't hear this other world that you know about. So you want to say to them: this is just round the corner from you, why don't you have a look? At a lesbian event I feel at home, but at the same time it's all in English, all with very English reference points, and I'm immediately frustrated. Then the same thing will happen to me in Polish contexts – the queer side of me just doesn't feel like it's getting enough of an airing. There is that sense of not only inhabiting an in-between place, but also wanting to invite other people into it or to take them across from one shore to another.

AB: I can understand the feeling of disconnection, of being with one group and thinking of all those other things, or feeling that you are only partially represented within the group, that only part of your personality belongs here and the other one or ones need to be quiet or are simply hushed.

MJ: When I go to Poland, everyone sees me as English, of course. Now, with the swing to the extreme right and fundamentalist Christian politics, I feel more isolated as a lesbian than I do here. It takes me back to how things were when I was growing up, when it was a nightmare to be LBGT+. It was very scary to come out. And this is still the case, whether in Chechnya or Brunei, or even pockets of the UK. Gay men faced prison, women were sent to psychiatric hospitals for being lesbian, struggled for custody of their children because they were lesbian. I know women who to this day won't tell a soul about a lesbian relationship they have had. It was a very harsh world back then. In the UK it began to change through the Women's Liberation Movement, the Gay Liberation Front, through activism we took part in then. And through literature as well. At that time I was looking very much to the Americans for queer writing – for political writing generally – reading people like Michelle Cliff, Irena Klepfisz, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde. These were very important writers to me.

I'm not saying all the battles were won, but there have been huge steps forwards within my life. In Poland it's gone backwards. That makes it hard going to Poland with my partner, for example. Our civil partnership isn't recognized there. I know lesbians who've left Poland because they've just had enough. They've been fighting for so long and just at the point when things might have started to get easier, this backlash has come and they just thought, 'we don't want to go through this all over again'. Going to Poland is difficult, but for me it's essential, because it's contact with the language, with my roots, with my culture. So it's also very enriching. I come back absolutely exhausted, but I have family and close friends there. That's irreplaceable.

Anna, you said you would never want to go back to Poland, but you visit regularly. What's that like for you?

AB: I'm not sure if my story is representative. Maybe it isn't, but it is my story. I've never experienced homophobia in Poland, not before I left Poland, when I was still in the closet, nor after, when I came out. And I am *out* out. I go there with my partner, but we've never had any unpleasant experiences. I come from a very religious, traditional, Catholic family, but when I came out, it was all, 'if you are happy, we are happy'. I guess I was just incredibly lucky. Of course, I know that nasty things happen, and that they happen more and more often nowadays.

MJ: When you write, is it primarily in Polish, or are you also writing more in English these days?

AB: I write in both languages – more and more in English, but I don't think I'm ever going to stop writing in Polish. When it comes to reading, it's quite fluid. Quite often I don't even remember which language I read a particular book in. I have to stop and think. I get lost between the languages. I make a conscious effort to read in Polish, because a few years ago I had this moment when my Polish language started slipping away from me. And that caused huge panic. My way of dealing with it is to speak Polish as much as possible and, even more importantly, to read Polish books. But I read a lot in English too, also a lot in translation from other languages. I read quite voraciously and indiscriminately. This confusion between the languages also comes across in my writing – sometimes I start writing something in one language and then switch to the other, because the other seems to be more appropriate for this particular text. Or I dream things in the wrong language. It's all very confused. Blended.

 Maria, you often pepper your English poems with Polish words ...

MJ: I think that's to do with not feeling represented enough. Although English is absolutely my dominant language, it isn't enough. In my last book there was Spanish all the way through. Not only because I couldn't find a particular word but because I feel a frustration with the limits of English. Recently I've started writing multilingually, in a more organic way. It's not just slipping in the odd word, but thinking differently. I've written in Ponglish, that language which Polish families here are familiar with, where you mix up the languages. It opens up new possibilities and makes you rethink language altogether.

AB: Do you believe that language indicates a certain mentality?

MJ: Certainly. When I speak Polish, my non-Polish friends have always said I sound different, that I'm louder, for example. They think I am having an argument with someone, so something must change!

FROM **THE TRUE STORY OF COWBOY HAT AND INGÉNUÉ,**
BY **MARIA JASTRZĘBSKA** (LIQUORICE FISH BOOKS, 2018)

Can I offer you a Slow Comfortable Screw up Against the Wall?

Someone in creaking leathers and jangling belt chains has slid onto the bar stool beside Ingénue. *Oh take no notice of Stud. Stud's harmless*, a second voice on her other side purrs. Stud's exploring the dominant discourse. *Thinks I'm wearing the trappings of submission to the hegemony but I could care less. Angel, by the way*, a lace glove is removed and a hand held out. Dame Blanche leans across the bar: *If these two get any more ironic, they'll iron themselves out. All the same*, Stud grumbles, *I hate to see a woman as – Stud pauses – electrifying yet autonomous on her own, if I had a woman half as beautiful I'd never leave her side.*

At closing time, disregarding all their protests, Dame Blanche swings Ingénue, fireman's lift style, over one shoulder and sets off across the fields. *There's something I've been meaning to say*, Dame Blanche begins under the starry sky once they're out of earshot of the small groups still round campfires. She stops, hearing Ingénue's snores louder now than a buffalo's.

The first thing Claribel had done, after they left her face down in the sand, was kill the mule. They had shot it many times, deliberately avoiding the head or heart so that it lay whimpering and twitching on its side. They had done this to terrify her but kept her alive for sport. There was a small knife tucked into a pocket of her saddlebag, which they hadn't noticed when they tipped the contents out. They'd taken her water and her money. *What did you ever do to anybody?* she said, raising the animal's head onto her thigh before she cut its throat.

POEMS BY ANNA BLASIAK

TRANSLATED FROM THE POLISH BY MARIA JASTRZĘBSKA, MARTA DZIUROSZ
AND THE AUTHOR

Łuk wycięcia zaplecka –

twoje ciało.
Mażowinowa brodawka.

Rocaille urastał w palce tkliwe.

Czułam je
leżąc w łóżku.
Chcę tu zawsze
spać.

Headboard carved into a bow –

your body.
Auricular nipple.

Rocaille growing into tender fingers.

I felt them
lying in bed.
I always want to sleep
here.

ZBIORY

Miąsz truskawek
nagrzanych słońcem
był jak krew.
Zlizywałam łąpczywie.

Zaraz przyjdą wiśnie.

HARVEST

Sun-drenched
the flesh of strawberries
was like blood
I licked greedily.

Cherries next.

EMIGRACJA

Uciekłam przed domem.
Dogonił.

EMIGRATION

I escaped home.
It caught up.

Anna Blasiak

Marta Dziurosz is a Polish literary translator and interpreter, and a literary curator. She was Free Word Centre's Translator in Residence 2015–16. Her writing and translations have been published in the *New Statesman*, *PEN Atlas* and elsewhere. She recently co-translated the collected works of Janusz Korczak and Renia Spiegel's *Diary* (Penguin Random House).

Translated by Maria Jastrzębska and Anna Blasiak

Translated by Marta Dziurosz

JACEK DEHNEL

TIMEPIECE, OR A MINOR LITURGY OF THE HOURS FOR THE NON-PRACTISING

INTRODUCTION BY THE TRANSLATOR, KAREN KOVACIK

Jacek Dehnel's 'Timepiece, or a Minor Liturgy of the Hours for the Non-Practising' was composed in May and June of 2006, when the poet was twenty-six, just after the death, in 2005, of Barbara Tarczyńska, the mother of Jacek's boyfriend, Piotr. Just as Piotr was coming out, his mother was diagnosed with cancer, and because he didn't want to add to her anxiety, he never revealed his sexuality to her. Jacek's poem, addressed to Barbara, casts the seven sections of the traditional prayer – Matins, Terce, Sext, and so on – into twelve rhymed couplets each. The original Polish employs the classical meter of the thirteen-syllable line, which in translation I've adapted to a relaxed iambic pentameter.

Why the form of the liturgy of the Hours, also known as the Divine Office, prayed seven times throughout the day? According to the Apostolic Constitution of the Catholic Church, 'The purpose of the Divine Office is to sanctify the day and all human activity.' Jacek's secular Hours allows him to imagine Barbara's presence from morning till night and to sanction his relationship with Piotr by enshrining it in cadence and language.

While translating this poem, I found myself thinking of Rilke, specifically his 'Requiem for a Friend', addressed to the painter Paula Modersohn-Becker after her death in childbirth. It's a long poem written in blank verse, which, as Robert Hass has noted, 'proceeds in bursts: it has

the awkwardness of grief, which seems to exhaust itself and then breaks out again'. Rilke, like Dehnel, uses a liturgical title (from the Mass for the dead) for his poem, and, in 1905, had published his own *Book of Hours*. Yet Rilke's 'Requiem', however intimate in its direct speech to Modersohn-Becker ('Come into the candlelight. I'm not afraid / to look the dead in the face'), ultimately asks her to return to the grave because the poet sees death as a perfected realm that, like art, exists outside the messy demands of life.

Dehnel's 'Timepiece', by contrast, never loses sight of the daily annoyances, quirks, and pleasures of living in Warsaw with Piotr Tarczyński: the snoring neighbour, the dirty elevator,

the way Piotr puffs out his cheeks before shaving, the rituals of the Christmas vigil, where the traditional foods – mushrooms, poppyseed, and dried fruit – all bear a resonance of death. There is also the practice of setting an empty plate at the feast for a wandering stranger or an ancestor back from the dead. Instead of urging Barbara to return to the grave, Dehnel invites her into their lives, even asking if she spies on him and Piotr when they're making love.

The practice of coming out has many layers: first to the self, then to close friends and sometimes to family, and, finally, to the culture at large. Same-sex marriage is still not allowed in Poland, and discrimination against LGBT+ people is pervasive. Last November, after fifteen years together, Jacek and Piotr were married in London. During the months I wrestled with this poem, I'd sometimes call to mind Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy's words in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the case that ended the prohibition against same-sex marriage in the United States:

'Until the mid-20th century, same-sex intimacy long had been condemned as immoral by the state itself in most Western nations, a belief often embodied in the criminal law. For this reason, among others, many

persons did not deem homosexuals to have dignity in their own distinct identity. A truthful declaration by same-sex couples of what was in their hearts had to remain unspoken.'

Or, as Adrienne Rich, writing lesbian love into the literary canon, observed in the first sonnet of *Twenty-One Love Poems*: 'No one has imagined us.'

'Timepiece' demands nothing less than a full imagining of the couple at its heart – with legacies familial, legal, literary and liturgical. The poem is simultaneously cosmopolitan and also specifically Polish, with its references to the language's intricate grammar and polite forms, the objects in the Dehnel-Tarczyński home inherited from previous generations, the holiday rituals, and even the Catholic prayer. This cultural dimension, of course, makes coming out political as well as personal, for a full imagining of same-sex love requires a society to break its timeworn fetters and to warm to a fuller embrace of all its citizens.

Karen Kovacik

Karen Kovacik is a poet and translator of contemporary Polish poetry. Her books include Metropolis Burning, Beyond the Velvet Curtain, winner of the Stan and Tom Wick Poetry Prize, and Nixon and I.

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**TIMEPIECE,
OR A MINOR LITURGY OF THE HOURS
FOR THE NON-PRACTISING**
BY **JACEK DEHNEL**
TRANSLATED FROM THE POLISH BY **KAREN KOVACIK**

The *Queer Riveter* is honoured to publish this exclusive – the English translation of prize-winning Polish author and poet Jacek Dehnel's 'Timepiece'.
With thanks to Jacek and his translator Karen Kovacic.

Jacek Dehnel © Czary Flucki



In memoriam B.T.

*They're a little afraid to approach
because they see us differently:
we live in metal cages, buttressed by
rebar, with pipes for gas and water,
and we're piled on top of each other,
floor after floor.*

*There are so many of them, and
just a few of us – but they envy us
for having the remarkable gadget
that makes everything easier:
a body.*

–B.M., during a seance

Matins

The sunny days are here. By five, the light's
been up for hours. What's grey turns pink and white –

the streets revamped as for some delegation:
scrubbed clean, seen fresh; all cause for lamentation –

the guy in #2 who snored; the trolley's blare,
rude porter, dirty lift – has disappeared.

Jacek Dehnel, born in 1980, is an award-winning poet, novelist and translator. Two of his novels are available in English: *Saturn* and *Lala*, both translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones. *Aperture*, a poetry collection selected and translated by Karen Kovacic, was a PEN America Award finalist. He lives in Warsaw with his husband Piotr Tarczyński, with whom he is also a co-author of three crime novels. The first volume, *Mrs Mohr Goes Missing* was recently published in English.

The morning 'rises' – actually stands upright,
woozy as a frost-tipped bough from excess light.

The cab's a tiny craft in an ocean of sun,
the driver the captain, who stays on and on

even as a brine of light pours through
the porthole, sticky and thick as a roux.

One thinks at these times: death's like a zeppelin,
a frigate, crossing the ocean for years on end,

transporting everyone aboard its fleet
to Entropy, kingdom where order's absolute.

After leaving the taxi, there's platform and train
where light and shadow pivot, lunge, and feint.

Out the window a different matins gets said
as tracks diverge atop a gravel bed

through fallow fields, a junkyard, mildewed sheds.
And now you think: death strikes like a cannonade

of nails, spade scraping a box, or butter pat
from a funeral feast on an unwashed plate.

Prime

When writing, should I use 'you' or 'ma'am'?
The latter, probably. I'd not say 'Mum'

if you still lived, since what divides us is,
well, everything. (Our situation's obvious.)

Where you are, do polite forms still stand?
'Dear Father, by your leave,' 'Most Reverend',

'The Honorable', 'Your Grace'. Is it like in art –
some yet unresurrected mass of body parts

at a communal bath, where speakers pipe
flat trumpet hymns? A crowded afterlife

of nudists? What's left of us? A scent, a name?
A shade of skin? What gives itself to flame?

What goes to maggots, larva, centipedes?
And what remains on heaven's balance sheet?

Is there some core of being that won't quit?
A particle, scrap – trinket clutched in the fist

of a toddler – call it the soul? And do you hear
that voice, trying to pierce through silent spheres

to reach you, ask you, beg your pardon, grieve?
May I ask the mother of the man I love

about things so personal, so close to us
as death? Is that all right? Especially as

I see his tears for you when he crops
close around your face in Photoshop.

Terce

What's visible up there? Train cars in a queue,
silver lines of rails beside a band of blue

like on a map. Forests all around, and isles
of streets from time to time with red roof tiles

spreading like tumours. And all those other lines:
air routes, the treks of reptiles, and nearby

dashed ranks of ants, plus predators' hatched tracks
(here the wolves', there the fox's solitary path).

The child's route to school and back again.
Salt making the rounds at wedding feasts to fête

the pair. And in these lines, I'm present, too,
believing you exist and that you know I do.

But, wait, 'up there' – whence comes this sentiment
that our loved dead live like some blissful clan

in heaven's fields? That, in the morning's cool,
they stroll about, and at the centre – like a well –

they sit around a peephole in the clouds,
dangling their legs and chewing on blades

of ambrosial grass? And now and then they'll glance
below at haystacks, cars, each dot and dash

of life. What naïveté! Both closer and deeper,
you're the grain in the wood, the wetness in water,

response to a knock or the flute's clear notes
from breath and touch. Or deer tracks in snow.

Sext

Here, where I'm headed – city of sterile towers,
roster of bus schedules – I can't make out

the beat of your clock. But then I reach our street,
the stairwell an oasis from the heat,

and on our door, the card with both surnames:
his – yours – and mine. Like crystal, come the chimes:

ding ding, ding dong, ding ding, and on to twelve.
Strange, this inheritance. It clangs on a shelf

above my desk, this clock that strangers owned
in other times; it wakes at night and sounds

punctually at three a.m., then half past four
and 5:15. We sleep, and it keeps guard

as time elapses: trickster knows what's what.
Strange, this inheritance. A cycling that won't quit.

Your son paging through my granny's books
and saying things my exes said; brass hooks

for drapes from former tenants, and the clock,
your father's once, which earlier (look

at the monogram) belonged to Count V.L. –
all legacies from testaments and wills.

And him. From you there's him, sweet remnant,
like 'love' declined from one case to the next

or the verb 'to love' in a new conjugation
(I'm just one person in a longer recitation).

None

Ding dong ding. Three o'clock, the air feels thick.
Beyond cut poplars, one can see the crack

on the house across the way. And your son sits
and works, sun falling on the copper wisp

of his good profile. Do you see it? Or him?
Here, within arm's reach, just at the rim

of desk and windowpane. Or are you bound
by rules of how you can approach, by rounds

of visiting hours? Such as only at night.
Not midnight, of course. No trembling from fright

and shivering under quilts. No shaking of chains
or rustling crinolines, the cheap domains

of horror films. Nothing more than a visit
without the right to speak. A lesser ticket

where the living strut the stage. But in a seat
where you see everything, within the reach

of a warm hand, which you don't have. He sits
and writes some more. When do you look at him?

Just now, at night, or dawn? At home? Outside?
When he brews coffee? Puffs his cheeks out wide

while shaving or takes a nap there on the couch?
When we make love? Or maybe there are bounds

of privacy just like in life? Doors shut,
averted gaze, a smile, a muffled gait.

Vespers

Since you're here, well, sit and dine with us:
this is your empty plate beside the cup.

Have poppy, chanterelles, and compote from dried fruit,
plus cockspur rye in this feast of midnight hue.

Black the wine in goblets of blackest glass,
black the bottle pouring silent, never fast.

Black honey and poppy on platters black as lead,
and around the table, conversations of the dead.

Meet these shot through the lung, those dead of TB,
some struck down by stroke or an unknown disease,

the one killed in the war on a Breslau stoop,
Gram's cousin from scarlet fever after strep,

the wrinkled great-grandmas, the aunts who went mad,
the uncle with V.D. and swarms of pale lads,

all those unrecalled who passed without a trace,
who had, in truth, no bad luck or uncommon grace:

they lived, gave birth, and died silently as plants –
like it or not, they too are members of your clan.

So sit with them and sup – time's not of the essence:
we've aeons to arrange our mutual presence.

Sit with them, dine – we're in the next room
though linger, dear one. You showed up too soon.

Next to your plate lie other ones for us
and those to whom we'll will tray, bed, and tub.

Compline

A shiver down the spine. Like the cold whirr
of tailor's shears. Whence comes this sudden fear

while in a train or washing up from lunch,
when something in the chest constricts that bunch

of muscle? Is this omen a primer of pain
after loss? Some Sunday school lesson

on suffering? With workbooks in stained covers
and punishments of bitter pills from wafers?

Departed neighbours, family, and close friends,
do you give notice at these bans of death?

With tenderness? Or as a hedge? So disaster
won't take us by surprise when someone's sister

does not return from Antilles. Or flight
A60 from Michigan winds up a site

of red, scorched earth, strewn with debris.
Or child's tumour, no mere lump above the ear,

sends out shoots like kudzu to the pancreas
or liver. And nothing or no one can help us.
Is the omen in the note you sent to us
that on our holiday, a wasp would skulk

so slowly to the fruit on the hot oilcloth,
and in that span, like the clicking of a lock,

we'd feel the sudden absence, stunning
lack, of the hand that still feeds us honey.

Jacek Dehnel

Translated by Karen Kovacic

LALA BY JACEK DEHNEL

TRANSLATED FROM THE POLISH BY ANTONIA LLOYD-JONES (ONEWORLD, 2018)

RIVETING REVIEW BY LUCY POPESCU

Stylistically, Jacek Dehnel's family saga is a hybrid. It reads like a memoir, includes real people and their portraits, covers historical events, and features a family tree and endnotes. And yet *Lala* is described as a novel. It is based on fact, but is crafted like fiction. The narrative is intricate, rambling and, like memory itself, sometimes frustratingly elusive.

Dehnel's family tales begin in Kiev in the 1860s and encompass more than one hundred and fifty years. Accounts of personal fortunes, and of loves won and lost, are set against some of the moments of the 20th century that helped to shape today's Poland.

On the first page, Dehnel tells us he is beginning at his story's end, with his grandmother, the eponymous *Lala*, sitting out her final days, like the doll she is named after, 'muffled in rugs and baggy knitted waistcoats, so very thin, small and light, it's hard to connect her with our memory'. *Lala* is made up of reminiscences, both Dehnel's and his granny's: 'the story begins, as usual, in pieces, now here, now there, in all sorts of different places and bodies, most of which ceased to exist long ago.' Indeed, *Lala* has a tendency to ramble, to repeat herself, to lose track of her thoughts and to misremember certain details. She rarely draws to a conclusion but, for Dehnel, 'of all the antiquities to be seen in my

northern Polish city, she was the most fascinating'.

Early on, we learn that Grandpapa Leonard, *Lala*'s father, faced the tsarist firing squad and owned the first automobile in Ukraine; that Grandmama Wanda was orphaned as a young girl and grew up in a convent before Leonard rescued her and made his fortune; and that another relation, Romusia, had galloping consumption. We are given snapshots of history, fragments of past lives, before learning more about each of these people and their place in the wider narrative.

Astonishingly, Dehnel (born in 1980) started writing down his grandmother's stories when he was fourteen and had completed *Lala* by the time he was twenty-four (it was originally published in 2006). In the final section, Dehnel interrupts *Lala*'s recollections and takes over the narrative, because, tragically, she had started to suffer from memory loss. Suddenly the focus becomes less about memory and more about saying goodbye to a loved one.

Dehnel is similarly fond of digression, ‘putting out shoots and proliferating into whole thickets of words and punchlines; unrestrained’. This rambling creativity appears to be a trait of contemporary Polish literature. Writing in the *TLS*, Dehnel observed: ‘Modern Polish fiction is often amorphous and untidy, replacing traditional order with linguistic inventiveness and the poetics of the dream.’

Dehnel is an acclaimed poet and this is clear in his lyrical descriptions of family and landscape. But *Lala* is a challenging novel – memories overlap and the reader has to work hard to keep up with his long, expansive sentences. Dehnel suggests that the ‘repetition of wise and beautiful things is wise and beautiful in itself, and is the same sort of virtuous act as feeding the hungry, caring for animals, watering plants or donating to charity’. I’m not entirely convinced, however, that such repetition enhances what is an already rich narrative.

The novel’s finer moments are when Dehnel alights on a theme and sticks with it. The periods when *Lala* lived under occupation – first under the Nazis, then the communists – are particularly memorable. Here, personal anecdotes illuminate the political. Dehnel’s

grandfather, Lala’s second husband, worked for the State Forests and thought himself a genuine communist because ‘he always put the good of the community in first place’. But his honesty got him into trouble because he ‘sniffed out all sorts of plots and swindles ... dubious hunting activities or illegal tree felling, selling timber on the side and profiteering; every time he was transferred to another department, and if he blew the whistle on something really serious, he was relocated to another city’.

Eloquently translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, Dehnel’s *Lala* offers an extraordinary insight into historical events by examining one family’s response to them. And in writing so explicitly about Lala’s mental deterioration in the novel’s final pages, Dehnel inhabits a space that is both private and public. His novel thus serves as a celebration of Lala’s life and a striking evocation of Poland’s turbulent past.

Lucy Popescu

Lucy Popescu reviews books for various publications including the Financial Times, TLS and New Humanist. Her anthology, A Country to Call Home, focusing on the experiences of young refugees, was published in June 2018.

QUEER EUROPEAN POETRY

A PLURALITY OF VOICES BY LAWRENCE SCHIMEL, GUEST POETRY EDITOR



Lawrence Schimel © Nieves Guerra

Almost always, when the subject of queer poetry is broached, one must first consider definitions: whether it is self-identity or content that determines inclusion in, or exclusion from, the 'queer' category as it is constructed by those discussing it. In simpler terms: would a poem be considered a 'gay poem' just because

the author is gay (and therefore possessed of a special/different sensibility), even if the content of the poem does not concern gay identity? Conversely, would a poem about queer identity but written by a poet who does not self-identify with the content be considered a 'queer poem'; or would that be a form of cultural appropriation?

There are poets whose work strives to create a queer language, to dismantle patriarchal and heteronormative norms all the way down to the linguistic level. There are others whose content may be queer even while working within traditional poetic forms and language. These questions, and how poets respond to them, vary widely between countries and

Lawrence Schimel is a bilingual author and translator originally from New York, now living in Madrid. He has published more than 100 books as author or anthologist, in many different genres. He has translated more than thirty poetry collections, most recently *Destruction of the Lover* by Luis Panini (Pleiades Press), *Bomarazo* by Elsa Cross (Shearsman), and *I Offer My Heart as a Target* by Johanny Vazquez Paz (Akashic).

languages, and depend on how they each approach gender – linguistically, culturally and, when not in English, in translation. It's complicated.

For this poetry selection, I have decided to use as my criteria writers who not only self-identify as part of the manifold LGBT+ community, but whose work is celebrating or overtly expressing this identity. My intention is to be representative but not exhaustive; for example, this sampling focuses primarily on recent or forthcoming works that are already translated into English. The one exception is my own translations of a trans poet from Catalunya in Spain, since I was unable to find recent or forthcoming volumes of work by trans poets in translation. The selections draw on many different language groups and areas of Europe, as well as from a mix of larger and smaller European languages, including non-national languages.

But this selection is just the tip of the iceberg of the vibrant queer poetry scene across Europe. We don't have access to many of its voices in English, but these poets are being widely translated into other European languages and influencing their peers in the poetic and queer communities in the rest of Europe.

Most anthologies of LGBT+ poetry tend to be specifically national, such as Luca Baldoni's comprehensive anthology of gay Italian poetry from 1900 to the present, *Le parole tra gli uomini* (Robin Edizioni, 2012), or Carmen Moreno's anthology of Spanish lesbian poetry *Mujeres que aman*

a mujeres (Ediciones Virtuvio, 2012). Sebastià Portell has just edited an anthology of LGBT+ Catalan poetry, *Amors sense casa* (Angle Editorial, 2018), and I have just edited the Spanish anthology *De Chueca al cielo: 100 poemas celebrando la diversidad LGTB* (Transexualia, 2019), published with support from Madrid Town Council and available free at selected municipal offices.

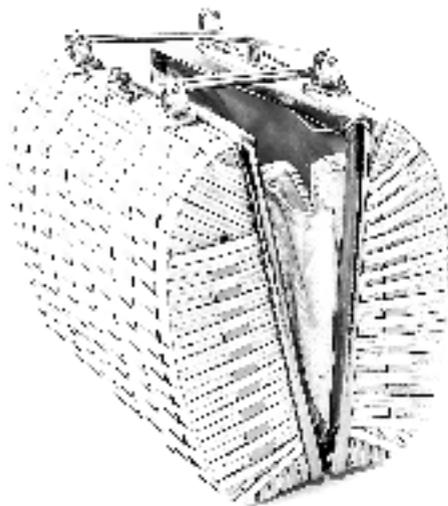
Most of these anthologies, alas, are available only in their original language. There is one recent exception: when Madrid hosted EuroPride a few years ago, the anthology *Correspondences: An Anthology of Contemporary Spanish LGBT Poetry* (Egales, 2017) was produced (and I translated it into English) as a way of offering a sample of Spain's queer cultural production and helping it cross linguistic and cultural boundaries. Hopefully more countries will produce similar multilingual projects or translations in future.

Perhaps the most exciting and all-encompassing Europe-wide queer poetry projects of recent years, though, have come out of Slovenia: *Moral bi spet priti* (Lambda, 2009) is a collection of the work of European gay male poets, and *Brez besed ji sledim* (Lambda, 2015) is a collection of European lesbian poetry. These two anthologies, both edited by Brane Mozetič and both around 250 pages long, do aim to be more comprehensive in scope, trying to include work from across Europe. They are the fruit of six years of workshops held in

Slovenia, co-sponsored by Literature Across Frontiers, the Centre for Slovenian Literature and ŠKUC (Students' Cultural and Art Centre). These workshops brought together gay poets and lesbian poets from smaller and larger languages across Europe to translate one another's work and discuss how identity and poetry interact, in their own poetry and in their respective countries. They offer Slovenian readers not just access to a plurality of voices from across Europe but also serve as a document of European queer poetry in the early decades of this century.

This small sampling in *The Queer Riveter* is the closest to recreating (to an infinitesimal degree) the work of these important anthologies. My hope is that these poems offer a snapshot of the queer European poetry recently translated into English, and also offer readers, whatever their orientation or identity, a glimpse of the various ways in which LGBT+ identity is being recorded in poetry. Hopefully in the process it will delight, entertain, and perhaps even inspire.

Lawrence Schimel



FROM *TRACING THE UNSPOKEN*
 BY MILAN SELJ (A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S PRESS, 2019)
 TRANSLATED FROM THE SLOVENIAN BY HARVEY VINCENT

There's a letter downstairs, waiting for me by the front door. The address is written in square letters I recognize straightaway. Trembling, I hide the envelope under a pillow. In the evening I summon enough courage to open it. As I write to you it is almost midnight. The two arms on the clock will soon be together. Like you and me. For a moment I almost believe you. Your games are lies. Nothing but lies.

We were sitting on a bench at the bus stop. Our eyes locked, avoiding the gazes of strangers and provoking them with our disdain. Later the descending road overtook the howling wind of disapproval. And if you said: The day is only an inevitable contrast to the night, I would have agreed. On the journey, our eyes sparkled with hints. The evening was a game of questions. You answered none of mine.

Around Christmas he became itchy and home-sick. I bought him a pair of shoes, a one-way ticket and credit for his mobile phone. Standing at the window I waited for his call while watching the first snowflakes. They always cover my restlessness with silence. I kept telling myself I was right to send him away. Will we be closer if he decides to come back?

Milan Selj is a Slovenian poet, translator and publicist. He is the author of four poetry collections, and the co-author of a satirical epistolary novel, *Spolitika*. His most recent collection, *Slediti neizgovorjenemu*, is forthcoming in English (translated by Harvey Vincent) from A Midsummer Night's Press under the title *Tracing the Unspoken*.

A shaved head is resting next to mine. I try to embrace his quick breath after the spill of burning sperm. Above the window sill, rays of sunlight slip through a slit in the curtains. Slowly, like an elegant jackal, he sneaks out of bed, leaving behind the impression of a sensuous shadow. I let him steal the last word before he leaves. His sharp fragrance floats in the air, enveloping my still quivering body.

Milan Selj

Translated by Harvey Vincent

Harvey Vincent is an American actor and director living in Paris. He is the author of the screenplay *Anneliese* and the play *Jack L - A Movie Mogul Mirage*, and his reviews have appeared in *Time Out London*.

FROM **IMPURE ACTS**
BY **ÁNGELO NÉSTORE** (INDOLENT BOOKS, AUTUMN 2019)
TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY **LAWRENCE SCHIMEL**

E io chi sono?

In the morning, I abandon my sex.
At sunset I return
when I strip to enter the shower.

My mother always says I have my father's shoulders.
With the mirror fogged with steam, my silhouette is broader, more lavish.
I draw a straight line with my fingers, wipe it out with my hand.

My eyes hold the sadness of the dolls
who played at being daughters,
which my parents wound up giving away.
The cold water brings me to my body,
I hide my penis between my legs.

Mama, who do I look like?

Ángelo Néstore is a poet, actor, translator, and professor. He is co-director of both the Irreconcilables International Poetry Festival and the feminist poetry publisher La Señora Dalloway. He has published two poetry collections: *Adán o nada* (Bandaaparte Editores) and *Actos impuros* (Ediciones Hiperión, XXXII Premio de Poesía Hiperión).

If My Father Tells Me

If my father tells me: *Be a man*,
I shrivel like a grub,
stick my belly on the fishhook.

Soft, like some mollusc without its shell,
I feel dismantled, keep my cool.

I then ask myself
what use was learning four languages
if words can't be heard beneath the water,
if I only know how to write poems.

Communion

Every day an iron turnstile
stops me at the gym's entrance.
The soundproofed glass turns the place into a showcase.
From this side I watch a blond man, clean-shaven,
with a military buzz cut and a sleeveless green shirt.
He has a sophisticated vanity with his quiff
and wide pants, which let one deduce golden pubic hair.
The guy takes a sip of his protein shake
and places on his shoulders the weight of masculinity that calls him.

I'd like to know what he's thinking
as he bends his knees theatrically.
How many times he'll count to ten.
Whether his arms, his back ache.
The identity of the woman waiting for him at home.

The blond boy looks up, exhausted.
I'm turned on by the sweat on his chin,
the candour of those beads soaking his towel.
I imagine myself crossing the threshold that separates us.
I open my mouth beneath his chin and stick out my tongue,
like a child kneeling before the altar.

Ángelo Néstore

Translated by Lawrence Schimel

FROM *SER HU(O)ME*∞(À)*
BY IAN BERMÚDEZ RAVENTÓS (BELLATERRA)
TRANSLATED FROM THE CATALAN BY LAWRENCE SCHIMEL

Whoever began to think
of how to catalogue
that which we call
man and woman
could have arranged to meet
with someone to stroll,
with anyone,
along the seashore,
and enjoy
the silence.

Identity

I remember the first time
that I looked at myself in the mirror.
I couldn't believe that,
given how many times my eyes
encountered my reflection
they had never before questioned:
Hey! You ... who are you?
Or if they'd done so...
they hadn't wanted to go
any further
in their interrogation...

the fear ... fear of difference,
fear that immobilizes the dissidence
that flows along the edges of a palace
outdated and decaying,
which just a few have constructed
within some pre-established
parameters
of exclusion.

Ian Bermúdez Raventós is a Catalan writer, linguist, translator & professor. He is the author of the poetry collection *Ser hu(o)me*∞(à)* (Bellaterra) and the graphic novel *Transito* (Pol.len & Bellaterra). He is the co-creator and co-ordinator of the project *DebuT**, a space for training and investigation of new trans identities and their forms of representation.

What use are classifications
 if I don't do anything but love you.
 If I was a woman or am a man
 (physically), if I were homo (or
 hetero), any of all that,
 what does it matter?
 If love doesn't abandon me
 and I only feel peace
 when I am with you.

Ian Bermúdez Raventós

Translated by Lawrence Schimel

**FROM *THE MOON IS A PILL*
 BY AUŠRA KAZILIŪNAITĖ (PARTHIAN BOOKS, 2018)
 TRANSLATED FROM THE LITHUANIAN BY RIMAS UZGIRIS**

invisible metamorphoses

would you love me
 if suddenly my gender
 changed or my scent
 the colour of my skin
 the time of year

would you still love
 if i were a flower and a stone
 or a flower growing
 among stones

and
 generally
 do you love me

in those blinks of an eye
 when i am truly
 there

Aušra Kaziliūnaitė is a non-binary, pan-sexual poet, performance artist and journalist from Lithuania. Last year Kaziliūnaitė's selected poems, *The Moon is a Pill*, translated by Rimas Uzgis, were published in English by Parthian Books. Kaziliūnaitė's poems have appeared in various anthologies, and have also been translated into many other languages.

storm

on your body – tattooed rain
falling leaves splashing
cars in the old town
and i –

my wet tattooed
clothes, torn shoes
and soaked hair

but there is no
umbrella
here

and no
you
on your body

wardrobe

i saw another person's dream
trying you on for size

it washed and ironed you
hung you in the closet
then threw you away
– you were just too big –

occasionally i meet
the homeless man
who wears you now

finally, there is light in his eyes

hope

i don't do the work i like to do
i avoid the people whom i love
i don't talk to those whose presence
i enjoy

only by doing dull things and
hanging out with shitty people
can i believe that the world is
beautiful

Aušra Kaziliūnaitė

Translated by Rimas Uzgis

Rimas Uzgis is a poet, translator, editor and critic. He is the translator of *Caravan Lullabies* by Ilzė Butkutė (A Midsummer Night's Press), *Crystal: Selected Poems* by Judita Vaičiūnaitė (Pica Pica Press) and *Then What: Selected Poems* by Gintaras Grajauskas (Bloodaxe Books, 2018).

LILJA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR

WRITING A CHAPTER IN HISTORY



Lilja Sigurðardóttir © Author's Archive

When I wrote *Snare*, the first book in the Reykjavík Noir Trilogy, which is about lesbian coke-smuggler Sonja and her girlfriend, bankster Agla, I didn't really think that the relationship between the women – the lesbian love – was the book's principal feature. I just wrote a story I wanted to write, a story I myself

would have liked to read. It wasn't until long after publication, however, that I realized I had written a chapter in the history of Icelandic crime fiction. And the reason why a book – an ordinary crime thriller in this case – becomes a historical contribution is that so few of the same kind exist.

The first lesbian I remember reading about was in a short story by Icelandic author Ásta Sigurðardóttir: 'Eldspýtur' ('Match Sticks'). In the story a remarkably beautiful but dangerous lesbian tries to lure the protagonist – a drunken young woman – into her car for an encounter. Although the lesbian was portrayed in a negative light, I still remember the deep impact this had on the adolescent me. I had a hard time

Icelandic crime-writer **Lilja Sigurðardóttir** has written four crime novels, with *Snare*, the first in the Reykjavík Noir series, hitting bestseller lists worldwide. *Trap* was published in 2018, and was a Book of the Year in Guardian. The film rights for the series have been bought by Palomar Pictures in California. Lilja lives in Reykjavík with her partner.

understanding the protagonist's reaction as she ran away in terror; I thought to myself that I would have jumped into the car without hesitation! The lack of role models representing desire between women was such that a negatively portrayed character became significant in my mind, and I remember being irrationally grateful for this story.

I am still very grateful when I get to read about women who desire women, and especially so in the type of literature I love most: crime fiction. I have enjoyed the attractive and smart bisexual private detective Stella Blómkvist for years, and *Bettý* by Arnaldur Indriðason is my favourite book from his large body of work. Of course, there are Icelandic crime authors with queer supporting characters – mostly gay men – for example, in the books of Yrsa Sigurðardóttir and Jónína Leósdóttir. Hopefully more Icelandic crime authors will gradually realize that not all characters need to be straight, white and able, so that we will see more variety in terms of characters and therefore represent our society better.

In my Reykjavík Noir Trilogy, with the titles *Snare*, *Trap* and *Cage*, the lead character, Sonja, is at ease with her own sexual orientation, although it is her relationship with another woman that indirectly gets her into the difficulties she finds herself in. Her lover Agla, on the other hand, is more troubled; within her a constant battle takes place between her own prejudices and her desire for Sonja.

The gratitude I have received from readers of these books has warmed my heart. So many non-lesbian people have thanked me for the insight into the minds and ways of a lesbian couple and said they found it interesting. And remembering my own thirst for seeing lesbian characters in stories, I am now very pleased to be able to present my Sapphic sisters with characters that represent their own realities. And by that I don't mean cocaine smuggling and financial misconduct!

Lilja Sigurðardóttir

FROM **TRAP**
BY **LILJA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR** (ORENDA BOOKS, 2018)
TRANSLATED FROM THE ICELANDIC BY **QUENTIN BATES**

LILJA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR

April 2011

Sonja was wrenched, shivering, from a deep sleep. She sat up in bed and looked at the thermometer on the air-conditioning unit; it was thirty degrees in the trailer. She had closed her eyes for an afternoon nap and fallen fast asleep while Tómas had gone to play with Duncan – a boy of a similar age who was staying in the next trailer. While she'd been snoozing, the sun had raised the temperature in their little space to thirty degrees, at which point the air-con had rumbled into action, blasting out ice-cold air.

Her dreams had been of pack ice drifting up to the shore alongside the trailer park, and however ridiculous the idea of sea ice off the coast of Florida might be, the dream had been so vivid that it took Sonja a few moments to shake off the image of grinding icebergs approaching the beach. While she knew the dream had been a fantasy and that the chill of the ice had in fact been the air-conditioning, it still left her uneasy. A dream of sea ice wasn't something that could bode well.

Sonja got off the bed, and as soon as she stepped on the floor, she stubbed a big toe on the loose board. This trailer was really starting to get on her nerves. But it didn't matter, because it was really time to move on. They had been here for three weeks, and that was already a dangerously long time. Tomorrow she would discreetly pack everything up and in the evening, without saying goodbye to any of the neighbours, and under cover of darkness, they would drive away in the old rattletrap she had paid for in cash. She had coughed up a month's rent in advance, so the trailer's owner wouldn't lose out.

This time, she and Tómas would travel northwards to Georgia and find a place there to rent for a week or two; and then they'd move on again – to some other location, where they would stay, but then depart before they'd put down any roots. They would leave before they could be noticed, before Adam could track them down. Adam who was Tómas's father; Adam who was her former husband; Adam the drug dealer. Adam the slave driver.

One day, once they had travelled far enough and hidden their tracks well enough for Sonja finally to feel secure, they would settle down. It would be in a quiet spot, maybe in the US, or maybe somewhere else. In fact, it didn't particularly matter where the place was, as long as it was somewhere they could disappear into the crowd, where she wouldn't constantly have to glance over her shoulder.

Sonja peered into the microwave – something that had become a habit. Inside, giving her a sense of security by being where it should be, was the sandwich box full of cash. It was a white box with a blue lid, and was stuffed with the dollars and euros she had scraped together during the year that she had been caught in Adam's trap. This bundle of cash was her lifeline, in this new existence where she dared trust nobody. She had got herself a prepaid Walmart MoneyCard and had loaded it with enough to keep them afloat for a few months, but she had not dared apply for a normal credit card; she didn't want to risk Agla, with her access to the banking system, using it to track her movements.

Her heart lurched at the thought of Agla. The memory of the scent of her hair and the warmth of her skin under the bedclothes brought a lump to Sonja's throat that refused to be swallowed. The more time that passed since their parting, the harder she had to work to stop herself from calling her. Iceland was behind her, and that was the way it was. This was her and Tómas's new life, and she was fully aware that to begin with it would be a lonely one. But loneliness wasn't her biggest problem; a much weightier concern was their safety – Tómas's in particular.

If she allowed herself the luxury of contacting Agla, there was every chance that Adam would sniff out their communication and use it to track her down.

Sonja opened the trailer door and sat down on the step. The air outside was hotter than inside the trailer and the afternoon sun cast long shadows from the trees across the bare earth at the centre of the cluster of trailers. Sonja took a deep breath of the outdoor air and tried to throw off the discomfort the dream had left her with. The old, toothless guy opposite stood over his barbecue, which sent up plumes of smoke as the fire took; Duncan's mother sat in a camp chair outside the trailer next door, listening to the radio. There was a peace to the place, but it would soon come to an end, broken by the noise of traffic and horns on the freeway as people began the commute home from work.

Duncan came out of his trailer at a run, along with the basketball that he dribbled everywhere. He half crouched over the ball, and Sonja smiled to

herself. She and Tómas had seen that his weird dribbling technique didn't affect his accuracy when he shot for the basket. His skill at basketball was unbelievable, and after a few days playing together, his interest had infected Tómas as well.

Tómas...

'Duncan! Where's Tómas?' she called, and the boy twisted in the air, dropped the ball through the basket fixed to the trunk of a palm tree and, when his feet were back on the ground, shrugged.

'Where is Tómas?' she repeated.

'I don't know,' Duncan said, still dribbling the ball. 'He went down to the beach just now, but then some guys came looking for him.'

'Guys? What guys?' In one bound Sonja was at Duncan's side.

He finally let the ball drop from his hands. 'Just guys,' Duncan said. 'Just some guys.'

'Tell me, Duncan. Where did they go?'

Duncan pointed towards the woods that lay between the trailer park and the beach.

'What's up?' Duncan's mother called from her camp chair, but Sonja didn't give herself time to reply.

She sprinted towards the beach, her mind racing. The vision of ice on the shore, the groaning of the floes as the waves grounded them on the beach and the chill that the white layer brought with it clouded her thoughts as if the dream were becoming a reality. She cursed herself for not having bought the gun she had seen in the flea market at the weekend.

It's never good for an Icelander to dream of sea ice, she thought. That means a hard spring to come, and ice brings bears.

Lilja Sigurðardóttir

Translated by Quentin Bates

Quentin Bates worked as a truck driver, teacher, netmaker, trawlerman and journalist before becoming the technical editor of a nautical magazine. He is the translator of Ragnar Jónasson's Dark Iceland series and Lilja Sigurðardóttir's Reykjavík Noir Trilogy. He is also the author of a series of crime novels set in Iceland.

TRAP BY LILJA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR

TRANSLATED FROM THE ICELANDIC BY QUENTIN BATES (ORENDA BOOKS, 2018)

RIVETING REVIEW BY MAX EASTERMAN

‘It’s never good for an Icelander to dream of sea ice, she thought. That means a hard spring to come, and ice brings bears.’

There are bears aplenty for Sonja Gunnarsdóttir in *Trap*, the second in Lilja Sigurðardóttir’s Reykjavík Noir series – and it’s in every way as tense and compelling a read as its predecessor. At the end of *Snare*, we left Sonja in Florida, whither she had fled with her son Tómas to escape her life as a drugs mule and her grade-A nemesis of a former husband, Adam, who had custody of the boy. So, as *Trap* opens, there are a number of ‘bears’ out to track Sonja down and exact vengeance for her disappearance. She rapidly finds herself back in Iceland, back in hock to the drugs barons and back to life without Tómas, locked in another battle with Adam and a host of other undesirables – including ‘Rikki the Sponge’ (she soon enough learns the origin of this moniker – to her extreme discomfort) and, bizarrely, a tiger ...

Her former female lover, Agla, is also in trouble, awaiting a prison sentence for her part in the Icelandic banking crash; and, moreover, owing a lot of money to some powerful men, who are determined to get it back. Although Sonja doesn’t want to see Agla again, their destinies are entwined, and for both women,

the trap is ever tighter. Sonja can see no escape:

‘... she wanted to make it plain that she understood and agreed with everything they said ... She tried to stand but her legs refused to obey, and she was still weak with terror, so weak, in fact, that her mind hadn’t even got as far as comprehending the humiliation of having wet herself.’

Once again, Lilja Sigurðardóttir writes with pace and intensity, switching rapidly between scenes and places, from Greenland to Paris to London to Mexico and back to an Iceland suddenly swathed in volcanic ash from the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull in 2010, which so effectively brings international air travel to an abrupt halt – including Sonja’s! The route is strewn with surprises and intrigues as tense as a coke-mule’s stomach, all brought out in Quentin Bates’ virtuoso translation:

“Please step aside for a moment.” In an instinctive movement, she shrank back from him, and although her mouth opened,

no sound came from between her lips ... it took only two or three seconds to shut her mouth and continue along the jetway as she realised that the customs team were speaking not to her but to the man behind her ...'

characters – their lives, loves, pleasures and nastinesses fit each strand of the story perfectly, and, as in *Snare*, each individual story (not to mention that tiger!) is seamlessly woven into a truly ripping yarn.

Max Easterman

In the end, customs officers are the least of Sonja's problems; she realises that running drugs has become more dangerous than ever before, as it moves inexorably into the world of hi-tech.

At no point did I ever doubt the authenticity of Sigurðardóttir's

Max Easterman is a journalist – he spent twenty-five years as a senior broadcaster with the BBC – university lecturer, translator, media trainer with Sounds Right, jazz musician and writer.



MORE RIVETING REVIEWS

TESTO JUNKIE BY PAUL B PRECIADO
TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY BRUCE BENDERSON
(FEMINIST PRESS, 2013)
REVIEWED BY JACKY COLLINS

Paul B Preciado's revolutionary text first burst onto the Spanish literary scene in 2008, as questions of gender, sexuality and identity were hotly debated through queer theory, and the instability and mutability of these constructs were speculated on by academics and among the LGBT+ community. In the current discussions on transgender inclusion, equality and rights, *Testo Junkie* remains highly relevant, particularly for its re-evaluation of the way gender is perceived in society today. Having engaged with the book when it was first published, I can attest to the fact that Bruce Benderson's skilful translation loses none of the impact of original text.

What seems to take the form of a diary charting the effects the testosterone gel Preciado was using to alter their (this seems the most appropriate pronoun) gender serves as the premise for an acerbic examination of the pharmaceutical industry and a meticulous deconstruction of gender as established in the West of the 1950s. The arguments put forward centre on the illusion of control that we have over our own bodies, gender, sexuality, sex, and any other aspect of identity that we believe we self-fashion. The author

Paul B Preciado has become one of the leading thinkers in the study of gender and sexuality. A professor of Political History of the Body, Gender Theory, and History of Performance at Paris VIII, he is also the author of *Manifiesto contrasexual*, which has become a queer theory classic, and *Pornotopia: Architecture and Sexuality in Playboy During the Cold War*, which has been named a finalist for the Anagrama Essay Prize.

identifies a range of products, including testosterone, the pill, serotonin and alcohol, produced by what they term the 'pharmacopornographic regime' of the 20th century (and originating principally in the US), which allow state regulation of the population.

There is a third strand in the memoir aspect of this writing. In the interaction between Preciado and their lover, VD, and in the lamenting of the loss of a close friend, GD, there is a deep well of desire, emotion and humanity. These elements are an effective counterpoint to the more didactic and philosophical sections of the book and provide rich insight into the author's mindset and personality.

Testo Junkie is without doubt a compelling and challenging read, at times bewildering, at times drawing deeply on the reader's emotions. It does assume previous knowledge and understanding of a range of political, cultural and identity theories (from writers such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Donna Haraway). Nevertheless, thanks to the personal nature and passion of much of the writing, the weightier theoretical ideas and intellectual examination

become more accessible. The text is illustrated, with drawings by the author as well as images taken from medical journals and pamphlets. Both for its content and its style, Preciado's work could be deemed the queerest publication on the queering of gender and subjectivity.

This Spanish/French gender theorist presents a candid discussion of the transsexual experience as a memoir, contrasting it sharply with theoretical and political analysis. It is also worth noting that this edition is credited to Paul B Preciado, as opposed to the original text, which bore the name Beatriz, thus acknowledging the power of transformation and self-identification sought after by the author. Alternating the names might also signify that the transformation charted in these pages is complete or fluid – perhaps in keeping with Preciado's own philosophy of gender and identity.

Jacky Collins

Jacky Collins works at Northumbria University and is currently focusing her research on Icelandic Crime Fiction, Film & TV. In 2014, in conjunction with the Lit & Phil Society, she set up Newcastle Noir, Newcastle's annual crime fiction event.

THE FUTURE IS HISTORY: HOW TOTALITARIANISM CLAIMED RUSSIA

BY MASHA GESSEN (GRANTA, 2017)

REVIEWED BY JENNIFER SARHA

I thought I knew something about Russia when I started reading this book; by the time I finished it, I realised that I knew nothing. I have less of an excuse than most Europeans – I am Finnish and Russia is our neighbour. Or rather – and this is worth remembering wherever you might reside – it is Russians who are our neighbours, regardless of what ‘Russia’ might be or do.

Masha Gessen’s *The Future Is History* can be read on several levels: as a history of contemporary Russia with a particular focus on the development of LGBT+ rights; and/or as a series of narratives about the lives of ordinary Russians. Gessen follows the lives of four people born around 1984, which allows her to explore the different experiences of people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. My interests led me to read it along a third strand, which might or might not be of interest to others: intellectual historiography. In other words, what should we know about Russia if we want to know Russia? And how is it possible to know a foreign country – or indeed our own?

Masha Gessen answers these questions through journalism that reads like fiction; histories of families, snapshots of crucial moments, narratives that explain how and why certain

events happen. This might have resulted in a fragmented narrative, but the driving force behind these stories, the burning question of what has brought Russia to where it is now, keeps the reader grounded.

This is, significantly, a history not only of political events, but also of intellectual experiences: what was it possible to know, and to think, in different times and places in Soviet history? What information was available, and how were the gaps explained – by academics, by politicians and by newspapers? Gessen’s book shows how crucial the dissemination and manipulation of information is for the lived experience in any given country, and how it effects the political choices people are able and allowed to make. I would like to read such a history for every country.

Her particular focus is on the mechanisms through which certain

Masha Gessen is a journalist who has written for the *New York Review of Books* and the *New Yorker*. She is the author of several books, including *Blood Matters: A Journey Along the Genetic Frontier*, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* and *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*.

cultural concepts – the equation of homosexuality with paedophilia, for example – are established as reality, something that people will believe to be true. Gessen is skilled in weaving a persuasive narrative through a wide range of evidence, from sociological studies to the personal narratives of the people concerned. Her history of contemporary Russia reveals a scenario in which, if this were a calculated campaign of manipulating people into homophobia, would read as horrific supervillainy.

What Gessen shows is that it doesn't take a supervillain to turn people against minorities, to long for a strong man to take over, to frame the

debate so that the unthinkable (torture and murder of gay people) becomes legitimised through association with the unobjectionable (protecting children from paedophiles). Her exposure of these mechanisms is only one of the reasons why this book should be required reading for anyone concerned with the spread of fake news.

Jennifer Sarha

Jennifer Sarha is a researcher of obscure European history by night, a wrangler of research funding applications by day. In her remaining free time she is attempting to learn all the languages in the world.

WHO KILLED MY FATHER BY ÉDOUARD LOUIS

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY LORIN STEIN (HARVILL SECKER, 2019)

REVIEWED BY PAUL BURSTON

Gay literature is filled with tales of disapproving fathers and their emotionally damaged offspring. The dysfunctional father-son dynamic appears in Larry Kramer's *Faggots*, Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* and more recently in Paul McVeigh's *The Good Son*.

It's also a key theme of *Who Killed My Father* by Édouard Louis. The French author first found fame with *The End of Eddy* – a novel that offers a fictionalized account of his troubled relationship with his father. In his latest book, he tries to make peace with the man who

raised him, not through fiction but with a companion piece which is half memoir, half essay.

Who Killed My Father is addressed to Louis's father – who is the kind of man Louis himself never could be: a tough, working-class guy who failed

Édouard Louis is the author of two novels and the editor of a book on the social scientist Pierre Bourdieu. His work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Guardian* and *Freeman's*. His first two novels, *The End of Eddy* and *History of Violence*, were translated into thirty languages, and have made him one of the most celebrated writers of his generation.

to escape his modest background and became a father – to Louis and two other children from a previous marriage. It opens with a series of stage directions (indeed, it has been made into a play). Two men stand apart in an empty space. Snow falls, slowly burying them both. Only the son speaks. The father doesn't say a word.

What follows is the most profoundly moving memoir I've read in years. The author visits his father after a period of months and is so shocked at his physical deterioration, he barely recognizes him. Compassion prompts a journey of discovery. As a child, Louis longed for his father's absence. Now he feels an urgent need to get to know him. His mother recalls how his father loved to dance. 'Hearing that your body had done something so free, so beautiful, and so at odds with your obsession with masculinity, it dawned on me that you might once have been a different person.' Later, Louis finds a family photo album and discovers that this homophobic man who sneered at any sign of effeminacy once dragged up as a cheerleader.

Then there were the darker times – the brooding silences, the heavy drinking, the angry outbursts. Himself the son of a violent alcoholic, Louis's

father swore he'd never hit his own children. Instead he throws wine glasses and words that wound. One day Louis seeks revenge by orchestrating a fight between his father and his physically stronger brother.

Yet despite telling people he hates his father, Louis admits, 'it often seems to me that I love you'. Seeing his father cry, he realizes 'you were as much a victim of the violence you inflicted as of the violence you endured'.

Finally, the author describes with righteous anger the factors leading to his father's demise – the factory job that mangled his body, the digestive problems resulting from months recuperating on his back, the poor diet and medications no longer paid for by the government. 'You're barely fifty years old. You belong to the category of humans whom politics has doomed to an early death.'

As the book ends, words are exchanged and father and son reach an understanding. In finally learning to forgive his father, Louis sets himself free. And the reader is moved beyond words.

Paul Burston

CHILDHOOD – TWO NOVELLAS BY GERARD REVE

TRANSLATED FROM THE DUTCH BY SAM GARRETT (PUSHKIN PRESS, 2018)

REVIEWED BY GURMEET SINGH

If there is such a thing as a ‘canon’ of European literature in English, then Gerard Reve’s name is not to be found in it. Tolstoy, Dante, Cervantes and the other heavyweight champions crowd the scene, crowned with laurels, enjoying a never-ending chorus of praise. ‘English Europe’, Europe as conceived by the English imagination, refined and great and classical and heroic, overlooks writers who work in the margins. Reve is such a writer.

Born in the 1920s in the Netherlands, Reve produced works that have become classics of Dutch literature. Alongside Harry Mulisch, he is considered one of the greatest post-war Dutch writers in his home country. However, where Mulisch fits nicely into the idea of ‘English Europe’, Reve resists this tendency. Mulisch’s impulse is towards rapture, to overload his stories, filling them to bursting with ideas, diversions, distractions, characters, plots. Reve is the antithesis.

His writing aims to take away, to delete, to leave unresolved and to offer less information than the reader may want. His two early novellas ‘Werther Nieland’ and ‘The Fall of the Boslowits Family’ (published here together as *Childhood* by Pushkin Press), are good examples of these tendencies. Written at an early stage

in Reve’s career, the novellas recreate the dark, mysterious and strange experiences of childhood.

‘Werther’ follows the story of Elmer, growing up in a rural community, developing an obsession with a friend. It is a bizarre, semi-absurd exploration of childhood: stating experiences, without explaining or expanding on them. As the scenes begin to pile up, the reader is left with a disturbing sense of what Elmer’s childhood is actually like: secretive, repetitive, invested with strange symbols and rituals, and often, suddenly and without regret, cruel. Elmer is given to momentary fits of violence, to urges to destroy things, and to belittling his friend Werther, whom he often describes in animal-like terms. It is a world familiar enough in its rural trappings, but enclosed by cruelty.

Gerard Reve is considered one of the greatest post-war Dutch authors, and was also the first openly gay writer in the country’s history. A complicated and controversial character, Reve is also hugely popular and critically acclaimed. The first English translation of his masterpiece *The Evenings* shipped more than 20,000 copies in the UK and was a three-time book of the year in 2016.

This a theme continued in 'The Fall', with a new character, Simon, who is growing up in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam. A family close to Simon's own, the Boslowits, are inevitably and tragically destroyed by the occupation. However, this destruction is not the 'point' of the novella, rather it is an extreme representation of one of the many forms of violence and indifferent cruelty experienced as daily realities and depicted in the novel. Sexual abuse pervades the novel, as does animal cruelty. And yet none of this is moderated by a loving God or parent; it simply is, and it is not explained away. If Mulisch and other writers provide solace by 'replacing' God with their excited and overbearing humanism, Reve gently rebuffs the reader for being so naive.

As such, the two novellas are quietly and ironically caustic, recreating the cruelty of childhood and wartime Europe, set against

a backdrop of presumed innocence and bucolic splendour. Violence abides in the life of Europe; a fact that writers like Mulisch often ignore, overwhelmed by the enduring power of concepts such as 'civilisation' and history. Reve is more honest: he tries to reproduce on the page life as it is lived: weird, impulsive and cruel. Like the Dutch poet, Hans Faverey, Reve's spare style creates a sharply defined world, which lingered in the mind long after I finished reading, as much for its lack of answers or resolution.

Gurmeet Singh

Gurmeet Singh is a writer and editor living and working in Berlin. He writes mostly on culture, technology and politics, and is also currently writing his first novel.



GAMES WITH GRETA & OTHER STORIESBY **SUZANA TRATNIK**TRANSLATED FROM THE SLOVENIAN BY **MICHAEL BIGGINS, TAMARA SOBAN, SPELA BIBIC, MOJCA ŠOSTARKO AND ELIZABETH ZARGI****(DALKEY ARCHIVE PRESS, 2016)**REVIEWED BY **ANNA BLASIAK**

A dense, tense and intense collection of thirteen short stories dealing with heavy issues, from violence, bullying, abuse and cruelty to social exclusion and homophobia, *Games with Greta & Other Stories* is a broken mirror, reflecting various aspects of life for queer women in Slovenian society, which, like most post-communist countries in Europe, seems still to be struggling with prejudice.

The stories vary substantially in length, but also, more importantly, in atmosphere and language, ranging from naturalistic descriptions of relationship issues, to more poetic, fairy-tale stories, or even parables. The title story 'Games with Greta' sees two little girls urging each other on to ever-more dangerous acts – a chicken gets its head chopped off and one of the girls almost falls into a dry well. My absolute favourite is another story from the 'parable' category, 'Sewing the Princess', about an almost magical world – a safe haven provided to a bullied girl by a local seamstress. They sit together and sew and create the perfect 'princess dress'. The dress turns out to be the perfect form of revenge for the girl on her bullies and for the seamstress on her sister. This story made me think of a chapter from Wioletta Greg's

Swallowing Mercury in which another formidable seamstress character is visited by the child protagonist.

Tratnik's narrators – most of the stories are narrated in the first person – are driven by a hunger for power and control, but they are often presented to us in those moments when they lose that control, when they stop thinking rationally and let their passions or desire take over. In some cases the line between pleasing the object of their desire and harming them becomes blurred, even crossed. Blood flows – literally and metaphorically.

As well as the dark issues described in those stories, there is also quite a lot of humour. In 'Geographical Positions', Tratnik makes fun of our attempts to categorize things – the absurdity and futility of it; its relativity. About reading maps she says:

Suzana Tratnik is a writer, translator, publicist, and sociologist. She has published six short-story collections, two novels (*My Name is Damjan* and *Third World*), a play, and three works of non-fiction. Tratnik was one of the founders of the LGBT+ rights movement in 1980s Yugoslavia. In 2007 she was awarded the Prešeren Foundation Prize, one of Slovenia's most prestigious literary awards.

'Fine, east and west – right and left. Right is east, that's where Russians and communism are; left is west, where Americans and other capitalists are. You can try to remember it all like this: on the right are communists, who are politically left wing, and on the left are the capitalists, who are politically right wing.'

Sometimes Tratnik adds a line of an incredible lyrical beauty in the middle of a seemingly naturalistic sequence: 'His drunken brother was like a fountain that alternately gurgled up curse words, disgusting whimpers,

unfocused anger, and bits of half-digested food'. And: 'I raise my hands up to my neck and squeeze. I empty the skull of its expressionless eyeballs and once and for all rescue it from the rolling splinters of my straw childhood.'

This is a very interesting collection: multifaceted, like life itself, mixing laughter with sexual desire, cruelty and violence with boredom, hunger for power with resignation; related by Tratnik with a certain bitterness and striking directness.

Anna Blasiak

CRIMSON

BY NIVIAQ KORNELIUSSEN (VIRAGO, 2018)

TRANSLATED FROM THE GREENLANDIC BY ANNA HALAGAR

REVIEWED BY URSULA PHILLIPS

Niviaq Korneliusen has made a dramatic entry into Nordic fiction. Far removed from criminal noir yet possessing something of the Bergmanesque, her novel renders her the best-known Greenlandic writer outside her homeland. It is written in Greenlandic, an Inuit language, which was only written down for the first time in the mid-19th century. Its original title was *Homo Sapienne*.

Set in Nuuk, Greenland's capital of roughly 18,000 inhabitants, *Crimson* portrays the claustrophobic lives – despite the grand, empty landscapes – of

five contemporary young people growing up in a Greenland depicted here as an insular, postcolonial society in which everyone knows one another

Niviaq Korneliusen grew up in South Greenland and studied Psychology at Aarhus University in Denmark. She started writing in 2013 and is the winner of many writing competitions in Greenland where her debut novel, *Crimson*, was published in 2014. She translated it herself from Greenlandic to Danish and is currently working on her second novel.

and which is struggling to establish an independent identity as a country. On the one hand, it is determined to disown the prejudices directed towards it by its erstwhile colonial master, Denmark. On the other hand it seems to confirm some of those very charges: for example, that Greenlanders are violent alcoholics given to child abuse – one of the five characters in the novel suffered abuse as a child from her own father; another flees to Denmark to escape a homophobic scandal, only to encounter a similar lack of acceptance for being a Greenlander in Copenhagen.

The five protagonists record events from their own first-person perspectives. This is pithy, vigorous prose narrated in the present tense, interspersed with text messages and hashtags, and bursting with youthful invective and suppressed emotion, as the characters grapple with their conflicted identity as modern Greenlanders and above all with the homophobic prejudices of a socially conservative society. Two, Arnaq and Sara, self-identify as lesbian, while one, Fia, rejects a stifling heterosexual relationship to discover her repressed preference for women. Fia's brother Inuk rejects his previous homophobic attitudes and comes out as gay, while Ivik, always uncomfortable in her 'female' body, eventually accepts that she/he is a man.

Since such identities cannot be publicly visible in Nuuk's existing bars and clubs, the novel portrays an underworld of night-time 'afterparties' in

private flats, characterized by excessive alcohol consumption and promiscuous sex. If this seems gruesome, or even tedious, it is underscored by a sardonic, self-deprecating humour, prompting a feeling of almost affectionate acceptance. Basically, however, the struggle is one against loneliness in a society that rejects difference in the name of national belonging.

The upshot of these stories is nevertheless positive. Key is the story of Sara and Fia, who meet in the opening pages and finally come together, thus providing a structural resolution to the whole. But Sara's story has another dimension: her close relationship with an elder sister (to whom the opening poetic epigraph is dedicated) and the birth of the sister's child, at which Sara (not its father) is present. The birth of new life changes the tenor of the narrative. Interestingly, as mother and aunt cuddle the baby, they say: 'we realise that we don't know the gender of the child'. Gender is secondary to love and human acceptance, as is sexuality, and indeed nationality. A youthful cry for our times.

Ursula Phillips

Ursula Phillips is a British translator from Polish and a writer on Polish literary history. Recent translations include novels by Zofia Nałkowska, Choucas (1927) and Boundary (1935), which received the Found in Translation Award 2015 and the PIASA Wacław Lednicki Award 2017.

BY ABDELLAH TAÏA (SEVEN STORIES PRESS, 2016)
 TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY ALISON L. STRAYER
 REVIEWED BY LUCY POPESCU

I first came across Moroccan writer Abdellah Taïa in 2006 at a PEN talk on sedition. He had recently caused something of a stir by coming out in a country where homosexuality is illegal. Taïa has lived in Paris since 1998, writes in French and, to date, has published eight novels. At the event, he talked openly about his early homosexual experiences and the difficulties of forging a sense of identity in a country that sees individualism as a threat.

Narrated from various perspectives, *Infidels* explores the alienation of three generations of one family, and Morocco's political and social repression. Silma is the adopted daughter of Saâdia Tadlaoui, an *introductrice*, witchdoctor and 'sex-specialist'. Saâdia helps couples on their wedding night and has to ensure 'blood flows onto the white sheet that will be proudly displayed for friends and enemies alike'. She is despised for the service she provides and treated like an outcast. The need for this ritual is a damning indictment of a patriarchal state which seeks to control its citizens' most intimate moments.

After Saâdia's death, poverty forces her daughter into a similar trap. Silma works as a prostitute, but enjoys fleeting security with a soldier. He introduces her son, Jallal, to the magnetism of Marilyn Monroe

(another outcast of sorts) in *River of no Return*. Jallal watches his mother identify with the actress: 'She was an infidel, like Marilyn. Like her, unhappy. A whore. A servant. A goddess.'

Silma and Jallal's lives fall apart when Silma is taken in for questioning by the Moroccan authorities. Her soldier has already left for the Western Sahara War but is believed to be a spy for the Sahrawi indigenous Polisario. Silma is brutally tortured and remains in prison for three years. She manages to arrange her young son's escape to Egypt where he is looked after by another prostitute. When mother and son are reunited, Silma is too damaged, mentally and physically to reconnect with Jallal and turns to religion.

Related in haunting, lyrical prose, *Infidels* is a cautionary tale, a love story, and a polemic against injustice. Following his mother's death, Jallal

Abdellah Taïa was born in the public library of Rabat in Morocco, where his father was the janitor and where his family lived until he was two years old. Acclaimed as both a novelist and filmmaker, he writes in French and has published eight books now widely translated, including *Le jour de roi*, which was awarded the prestigious French Prix de Flore in 2010.

has to forge a new life for himself. He moves to Brussels and falls for a young man, Mahmoud, a Belgian convert to Islam, who is apparently dying of cancer. Too late, Jallal realises he has been groomed by Mahmoud to commit jihad. Their religious and sexual devotion intertwine in Casablanca, in the cold, dark Mosque of Hassan II.

Täia's powerful tale, superbly translated by Alison L. Strayer, serves as a stark warning to those authoritarian regimes that deny individualism, criminalize love, and

torture their citizens. Violence breeds violence, and it is Jallal's pariah status, Täia suggests, that propels him towards self-destruction. At the gates of heaven, it is fitting that Jallal is welcomed by Monroe, rather than the prerequisite virgin maidens. She observes: 'I'm like you. In misfortune and in power. Divine and orphaned. I'm made of the same stuff as you. I'm in you. In everybody.'

Lucy Popescu



ZSÓFIA BÁN

FROM *NIGHT SCHOOL: A READER FOR GROWNUPS*

(OPEN LETTER, 2019)

TRANSLATED FROM THE HUNGARIAN BY JIM TUCKER

Zsófia Bán ©: sbakowiczgspartography www.stekoart.com



The Two Fridas (school beyond the border)

They had us sitting together, though that wasn't what we wanted. We even said we didn't. At that, our teacher whisked her cane staff through the air with an astonishing alacrity, given her body weight. Who asked you, she asked, and since no one had asked, we decided not to answer rather than

be asked again. We sat in silence. Held our traps. The whole class held its traps. You might say it's not particularly good being a new kid. Everyone is constantly sizing you up, particularly if there are two of you, and even more particularly if the two of you are one. We tried to ease the situation by dressing differently: Frida would wear a richly-laced long white dress with three-quarter sleeves, its lower hem adorned with a cute little red flower pattern, while I had on a blue and yellow top matched with a long, olive-green skirt with white flounces at the hem (sadly, jewellery was not allowed,

Zsófia Bán grew up in Brazil and Hungary, and is the author of three works of fiction and four essay collections. Winner of numerous prizes for her writing, she is also a former writer-in-residence at the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) programme, and is currently a professor of American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest.

which always made us feel like we were going out naked). Even so, we were constantly being mistaken for one another. They said it was confusing that we both had the same name, though we thought this should actually make things easier. Not for them, though. Well my little dolls, we were told with unrestrained superiority, the custom around here is to call two identical copies by different names. So they wouldn't be so identical. There is a certain logic to that, we said when we still thought there was some sense in debating them, but you must admit that another view is equally acceptable: if two identicals are identical, then their names should be identical, too. The multiplicity of such systems of logic is known as 'cultural difference'. This got a big belly laugh out of the whole class.

The only one who didn't laugh was the Gypsy boy, Sanyi Lakatos. He could empathize; he knew from cultural differences. I'll smash their faces in if you want, he said. We didn't, but thanked him kindly anyway. Gracias. We liked Sanyi Lakatos. He could flip a compass over his knuckles like nobody else. He also reminded us of the boys back home. Especially Diego. Diego was half-Indian, while Sanyi Lakatos was completely Indian. One of us always carried a medallion portrait of Diego until it was confiscated by the lady who taught chemistry. She said it was distracting us from the compounds. If she only knew how wrong she was! The best chemistry in the world was the kind we had with Diego, but those washboard-chested toothpicks couldn't even imagine what that was. We were much more developed than they were: for one thing, we already had moustaches, something they found—how should we put it?—off-putting. (Alright, they gave us hell for it.) They said that sort of thing wasn't done around here. Said we couldn't be assembling for patrol like that. Said a Pioneer couldn't go around looking like that. Thank God, we said, one less thing to worry about. Needless to say, we shouldn't have said that. There's no God around here, screamed the homeroom teacher, and her face, glistening with oils, went all red. No she said, just listen to Comrade Lenik and our pal Comrade Principal. (We wondered about this Comrade Lenik, but dared not ask any questions, thinking this would only make matters worse.) Pack yourselves right off to the principal's office, and take your report cards with you. Our pal Comrade Principal (if he was our pal then we were the mayor of Teotihuacan) received us with excessive smarm, which only made him more frightening. He inquired, and I quote, what had brought us there, and had we perhaps gone a step over the line, and now now girls, let's have a confession before I get all in a huff. Since we didn't know why we were

there, we said nothing. Girls, he said, better not squinch your eyebrows like that when talking to me, or things will really get ugly. Unfortunately, we were in no position to satisfy this request spliced into a threat, given that we were stuck that way. It was no use Grandma Kaló's telling us a thousand times, Oh Fridas Fridas, don't squinch your eyebrows because you'll get stuck that way. We just wouldn't listen. We squinched and squinched until, one day, we just got stuck that way. Hence we were in no position to satisfy the request of our comrade the principal, and told him as much. To this, he responded that we would deeply regret this, and sternly asked for our report books. Our comrade the principal got to writing and writing. We envied him this facility; as for us, we could spend all day pondering the right words. There we stood, in the middle of the principal's office, and suddenly became aware that the lazy spot of afternoon sun had faded from the national emblem on the wall, framed by sheaves of wheat. In other words, dusk had fallen. Alright then, said our comrade principal at last, there we are. Now, you two just take this home for your father to sign. And I'd better not see you here any more because, well, now now, he said unctuously, which sent a shiver down both our spines.

Zsófia Bán

Translated by Jim Tucker

Jim Tucker, a classical philologist living in Budapest, translated works from German, French, and Italian before making the acquaintance of George Konrád, for whom he has since translated some thirty-five essays from the Hungarian, in addition to works by numerous other authors.



NIGHT SCHOOL: A READER FOR GROWNUPS

BY ZSÓFIA BÁN (OPEN LETTER, 2019)

TRANSLATED FROM THE HUNGARIAN BY JIM TUCKER

WITH AN AFTERWORD BY PÉTER NÁDAS

RIVETING REVIEW BY JONATHAN LEVI

With EasyJets and internets zooming us from our living rooms into the jungles and cathedrals of foreign lands faster than a speeding bullet, it's no wonder that it's becoming less and less possible to squeeze the contemporary writer into any particular geographical or literary pigeon-hole. So let's not call Zsófia Bán a remarkable Hungarian writer – although it is thanks to translator Jim Tucker's acrobatic agility with Hungarian and English that we Anglos finally have the chance to visit the circus of her imagination. Born in Brazil of Jewish parents, Bán moved to Hungary when she was an adolescent, and has made a career teaching American studies in Budapest, while writing fiction and essays that have drawn the praise of the dean of the Hungarian literati, Péter Nádas.

Night School, written in 2009, the first of her fiction to be translated into English, is as much of a mashup as Bán herself. In one story, the cynical 18th-century aristocrats of *Liaisons Dangereuses* find themselves in the United States on the cusp of 9/11. In another the two Fridas of la Kahlo, linked by a single heart in the famous double self-portrait, are a pair of unfortunate twins dropped into the mean-girls midst of a communist-era Hungarian high school.

Bán is a citizen of history and a virtuoso of language, a reminder that Portuguese and Hungarian were once the tongues of empires. Her riffs – at least as brought to us in Tucker's sizzling translation – are often long, loopy, sentences/paragraphs, as complex as the rococo curlicues of her

compatriot László Krasznahorkai, but hipper and sexier, with overtones of Hunter S. Thompson, Frank Zappa, and The Firesign Theater.

Night School is subtitled 'A Reader for Grownups'. Each chapter is headed with a subject topic ('Geography', 'Biology', 'Recess'), pockmarked with Sebaldian photos and illustrations, and tied off with a set of discussion questions that do more to confuse the reader and make us wonder what we have just read. The confusion is consistently hilarious and bracing. Bán is one of those writers who is not only interested in everything, from the colour of Madame Bovary's eyes to the origins of gravity, but infects the reader with the virus of her curiosity. The titles of the sections might seem arbitrary at first ('Concerto' – for

a story about rape). But in symphony, they make up the stuff of life, the sounds and the silences, the lessons worth learning, particularly because they are never taught during the day and bear the forbidden licence of the night.

Some of Bán's stories are cute, like the complaint of Edouard Manet about Victorine, the artist who modelled for his *Olympie*. Some are genuinely horrifying. Some require a cultural knowledge that her non-Hungarian, non-Brazilian readers may lack – for example, a familiarity with Hungary's homegrown fascists, the Arrow Cross, or Brazil's legendary football players Zezé and Edson

Arantes do Nascimento, better known as Pelé. The pitfalls of reading literature in translation are often its joys – discovering yourself in a place where something is happening but you don't quite know what it is. Nevertheless, 'knowledge' is a tricky word in Bán's *Night School*. This is not day-school learning, nor the stuff dreamt of in night-time philosophy class.

Jonathan Levi

US-born Jonathan Levi is the author of the novels Septimania and A Guide for the Perplexed. A founding editor of Granta, he currently lives and teaches in Rome.



SIMON FROEHLING

VIGNETTES

Simon Froehling © Nikko Rot



playing berlin

and this is how: watch a buzzard catch a crow in the tiergarten and be overwhelmed by the cruelty and go shopping but not buy anything after all and let you stamp the credit for my coffee on your loyalty card and bitch about schaubühne because *crave* is completely sold out and pretend that we know every-

one and even the playwright although the playwright is long dead and we barely know anyone especially me and go to the cinema instead and watch a terrible american movie but still kind of like it and take your new friend to a bar where women actually aren't allowed and not really get into the swing of things and only realise at home that we should have bought wine and have good sex for the first time in ages even without kissing and watch tv together in the old-fashioned rocking chair and for a short while feel no jealousy whatsoever and sleep until the others get back from partying in the

Simon Froehling was born in Switzerland to an Australian mother and a Swiss father. Roughly a dozen of his plays were produced or published before he graduated in 2009. His BA thesis included the novel *Lange Nächte Tag*, which was published to critical acclaim by Bilgerverlag. Simon has received numerous awards for his work, most recently the Network cultural prize for his contribution to queer arts in 2014. Around the same time he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

east and treat them all to coffee at the flea market and buy your friend a green shawl made out of raw silk and say goodbye to her because she has mysterious plans for lunch and lose the others somewhere by the vinyl and find the east german sandman but don't buy the doll even though it's really cheap because you think that's far too nostalgic and cruise home hand in hand through the tiergarten and not spot a single guy who could be interested not even from afar and remember that buzzard catching that crow or was it a hawk and get invited for dinner and again the east and find an excuse to go out on our own and right at the end tell you that you smell of music much too loud and promise myself not to miss you and repeat the promise and repeat the promise and repeat the promise. and then leave again.

after all

after all the bedrooms and the kitchens, the sofas and the tables, the back seats of cars, after all the train stations and airports, the cottaging and cruising in clubs and outdoors, after all the danger, the fear and the exhilaration, after all the couples and throuples, or is it triads? all the tirades! after groups and orgies with twinks and bears and cubs and otters in leather and latex, in rubber, in nothing, after the big, the small, the medium, the tiny, the huge, the horse, the massive and the monster, after lots of foreskin (like nature intended), after cut, after bent, after beer can and mushroom, after thick and thin, after rough, after tender with truckers and bankers, with judges and divers, with artists and waiters, lawyers and painters, after all the your-place-or-mine, the showers, the bathtubs, the pools and the oceans, after all the poppers, the viagra (but never together), the roofies, the coke, the ghb and the tina, after the ecstasy, the ecstasy! and all that coming down, after the cum, the spit, the sweat and the piss, after manhunt, scruff and grindr, those graveyards of quickies, of boyfriends, of lovers, after all those hanky codes and abbreviations – the ff, the pp, the tt, the what? – after all that bdsm with the muscled, the chubby, the toned, the tanned and the way-too-skinny, after all the porn and the piercings, the tattoos and the tickling, after all the jerking and jacking but mainly the fucking with exes, with friends, with neighbours, with lovers, again and again the strangers, the strangers, after the kissing and licking and sucking and spitting, the slapping,

the whipping, the fisting and the rimming, after rome and paris, berlin and zurich, after london, madrid and athens, to be honest?
 to do absolutely nothing
 in bed with someone
 except perhaps: netflix.

Hobbies: none

As a child I could hear the ocean in the large conch that lay on my mother's nightstand, and as a young adult a Thai lover taught me to dive. For the first time in my life I felt entirely in my element, as the expression fittingly goes.

A lot has happened since:

I received an education and found not only a job but also a vocation. I travelled a lot and had busloads of sex. I was ill for a very long time, always in love and often had a man by my side – usually the wrong one – and twice a dog. I planted trees, wrote poems, but never killed anyone (apart from myself nearly, once). I was always quite poor, which troubled me more than I care to admit. I moved to a fast, dirty and very loud city in a cheaper and much sunnier country, where I will always feel a bit out of place, as I will in its language, which I don't mind at all. I've been sober for nearly as long as I was an addict. I know myself well and nearly believe the voice that keeps repeating that I'm no longer searching for anything – especially for something as elusive as love. I was rarely content, which I regret, but which will pay off when I fill books with it one day.

For now, however, it suffices to say:

I have learnt to lie down on my bed, flat on my back, entirely still. I have learnt to block out the noise and the stench, the sweltering heat, and to sink deep down into myself. I need no shell, nor do I need an ocean, and I swear: I can see all the fish in the world.

Simon Froehling

These vignettes were either written in English or translated from German by the author.

A bilingual, German-English version of playing berlin was published in the Swiss literary magazine Entwürfe in 2006 and the Solothurn Literary Day's anthology New Swiss Writing in 2008.

The original German version of Hobbies: none was published in the Swiss literary magazine Orte as well as the only queer German-language literary publication Glitter in 2018.

WEST CAMEL

FROM *ATTEND* (ORENDA BOOKS, 2018)

'I can't die.'

The ridiculous words came back to Sam as he walked through the market and became caught in a clutch of mothers and children clustered around a stall selling cheap toys. The stallholder seemed in a rush to get rid of the broad, rattling boxes: 'It's all kosher stuff, ladies. Cut price 'cos it's my mother's birthday.'

'I can't die,' Deborah had said, then tried to collect herself, sniffing and blinking. He had almost stroked her arm; had almost said he believed her as she told him the ridiculous tale of a piece of sewing that could make someone immortal. But he had put his hands back in his lap and listened in silence. And then he had dashed back home to meet Derek, attacking him with a rough embrace and biting down on the muscle of his shoulder. Derek had grunted and laughed.

In the couple of days since, those words – 'I can't die' – had been repeating in his head and Sam had ignored them. He had turned away as if he hadn't heard. But now, trapped beside the toy stall, they were suddenly louder – as if Deborah were perched on his shoulder, shouting in his ear.



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West Camel is a writer, editor and reviewer. He is the Editor of *The Riveter* magazine. His debut novel *Attend* was published in December 2018.

None of the mothers around the stall seemed to see him; no one moved a pram or pulled their brats out of his way. He had to lay a flat hand on a woman's back to get himself out of the crowd. Like a struck match, his irritation flamed into anger – at Deborah; at her dull, homemade clothes, her decrepit house. Her insistence that no one paid her any attention. He strode past the backs of the stalls, which were beginning to close up for the afternoon. Of course people saw her; and if they ignored her, it was her own fault, with all the stupid stories she told.

He closed his eyes for a second and shook his head. He had spent long self-pitying days in his parents' house, standing at his bedroom window, gazing through the net curtain at the people passing on the road below. But he had left – despite his troubles, he had left; and here he was, making at least a bit of a life.

The air rang with shouts and clangs as people pulled apart the frames of their stalls, got in each other's way and loaded up their carts and vans. What would it be like to have a stall here? He had seen someone selling cloth – perhaps someone at the warehouse could help him with stock. Perhaps Derek had a contact.

And then he saw him.

He was standing outside the Vietnamese supermarket with another man. The muscles of Sam's face twitched into a smile and his throat prepared itself for words. He crossed the road, accelerating his pace, eager to touch Derek, if only his suited arm.

But Derek was red-faced; his hand jerked up and down and his voice was tight, fast. Sam slowed slightly, not sure how to interrupt.

The other man was speaking now: 'We'll sort Nigel out for you, Derek. He's dead meat. He's pissed too many people off.' His hand was on Derek's shoulder, shaking him firmly. The two men were strikingly similar – solid, with thick red necks under cropped hair. They wore suits of almost the same grey, their open-necked shirts almost the same white. But, unlike Derek, the other man's face was pale and round, his eyes large and green, his expression flat – apart from a slight movement of his eyebrows that questioned Sam's interest as he approached. Sam's back prickled.

And then Derek saw Sam.

As their eyes met, it was as if Sam had climbed two steps, and he let his smile open. But Derek's jaw hung loose and his thick eyelashes beat a stuttered rhythm. Then he switched his gaze back to his companion without a word or a nod, wiping his hand over his face.

Sam's smile was still in his cheeks, but it was a dumb grin now. He stumbled slightly, as if shoved back downstairs and, swaying away from the pair, his heel slipped off the kerb, jarring his whole body. He was capsized; tipped into gaspingly cold water. He could not quite control his limbs. Squeezing between two stalls he tripped over bundles of unsold goods and then found himself stuck behind the market's rubbish truck. It crept inexorably forward, bleeping and flashing, its band of peons feeding its wide back jaw. There was no way around it. Derek had ignored him.

West Camel



THE RIVETER

AFTERWORD

BY ROSIE GOLDSMITH, RIVETER-IN-CHIEF

Our riveting team is proud of this pioneering little magazine. It's not been easy gathering this selection of translated queer poetry and prose from around Europe, not only because of the continuing (and, in some European countries, dangerously growing) political, cultural and social hurdles, but because there actually isn't that much contemporary queer fiction translated into English. Maybe we can inspire more. Producing this magazine has also been difficult because this is our second *Riveter* magazine where we have been unable to raise additional funding to match our grant from Arts Council England – to whom we are, as ever, profoundly grateful. If our beloved *Riveter* magazine can be produced on a shoestring, as this one has been, imagine what we could do if we were 'to win the lottery'.

When Anna Blasiak and West Camel – both writers themselves, and my Eurolitnet team-mates who happen

to be queer – proposed this magazine to me, I immediately said YES! I trust their instincts and love their writing. The time was right. A magazine of queer writing in English from Europe did not exist: could we do it? When the very excellent queer literary icons Paul Burston, Lawrence Schimel, Jacek Dehnel and Lilja Sigurðardóttir then agreed to contribute, I knew we would be able to create something relevant and exciting. I hope you've enjoyed reading their poetry and prose, not because it's queer but because it is good literature. But yes, also because it provides an insight into the challenges of being queer today in a literary world dominated by the stereotypical straight, white, middle-class male.

We live in queer times, we really do. No, I'm not talking about how odd Trump and Brexit are (both arguably anti-queer) but rather about the positive debate round sexual orientation and identity. Fifty years

after the Stonewall riots, thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, LGBT+ issues are part of a wider topical discussion around human rights, sexual identity, equality, prejudice and political struggle. All these are reflected in literature, as our magazine demonstrates, and literature provides a mirror, escape, outlet and insight into often marginalized, threatened individuals and communities – if you read our items from, for example, Russia and Poland, you'll understand. Understanding, explaining, naming, shaming and labelling are important today as we strive for legal recognition and visibility. I say 'we' because I write as a white, middle-class, stereotypical (sic) woman who has woken up to the fact that I too have been marginalized and abused over the decades by teachers and employers – and I am angry. We are in this together and –

in the same way as everyone working on this magazine – I want to make a difference.

However, if, like me, you are also occasionally tired by the constant campaigning, labelling and zeitgeist-shouting and would prefer to celebrate what we have – then I believe we've been able to celebrate too: there's some beautiful work in this magazine which is quite simply great, riveting writing. *The Queer Riveter* has made me read and think more expansively. It is a proud validation of modern times. Thank you for reading.

Rosie Goldsmith

Rosie Goldsmith (aka Rosie the Riveter) is Director of the European Literature Network and Riveter-in-Chief.



THE ^{Team} RIVETER

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West Camel, Editor
Paul Burston, Guest Editor
Lawrence Schimel, Guest Poetry Editor
Anna Blasiak, Design and Production Editor
Lisa Kallou, Cover and Inside Photography

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POLARI^{*}



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