

The background features a large, abstract composition of orange and white shapes. A large white circle is partially visible on the left side, overlapping an orange shape. Below it, a white trapezoidal shape with a pointed bottom-right corner is set against an orange background. The text is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the page.

**Emerging
Literary
Translators
— 2021**

The Emerging Literary Translator Mentorships are curated and run by the National Centre for Writing. Each year we support a new cohort of emerging translators into English, with a particular focus on languages whose literature is underrepresented in English translation. We have also pioneered the development of translation skills via non-language-specific mentorships, in which the mentor need not necessarily translate from the mentee's source language. For the past three years this has enabled us, with the generous support of Tilted Axis Press and Visible Communities, to develop our commitment to underrepresented writers by offering a specific mentorship for a UK-resident BAME translator.

The Emerging Literary Translator Mentorships were founded in 2010 by writer, editor and translator, Daniel Hahn.

With our warmest thanks to all this year's mentors: Sarah Ardizzone, Polly Barton, Robert Chandler, Howard Curtis, Kari Dickson, Paul Russell Garrett, Anton Hur, Meena Kandasamy, Antonia Lloyd-Jones.

Sincere thanks also to the organisations which have helped to fund the programme: Arts Council England, Danish Arts Foundation, the Harvill Secker Young Translators' Prize, Italian Cultural Institute, Literary Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea), Norwegian Literature Abroad (NORLA), Polish Cultural Institute London, Pro-Helvetia, Royal Norwegian Embassy, Russian Institute for Literary Translation, the Tadashi Yanai Initiative for Globalizing Japanese Humanities at UCLA and Waseda University and the Visible Communities programme.

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‘Despite the global challenges, the restrictions on being together and the impossibility of travel, our Emerging Literary Translators 20/21 have grown in strength, courage and confidence, and in their work and good spirit proven themselves to be an unforgettable cohort in this unforgettable year.

We are so proud and pleased to present this anthology of their work, pieces that capture a flavour of the year we’ve collectively weathered – of parenting and labour, of a life rich in imagination while adventures have been stalled, snapshots of conflict and grief, and what it is to protect and care for those we love.

These translations celebrate the originality and vigour of the original authors as well as the creative talents of the translators themselves. Technically striking, ambitious, imaginative and playful, these translators demonstrate the range and vim of the contemporary literary translation scene and bring great hope and optimism for the rude health of our literary landscape.’

— Peggy Hughes, Programme Director,
National Centre for Writing

Foreword

2020 has been a year of change and upheaval for all of us, requiring everyone to adapt to a new way of living, working, socialising and even speaking. Not least the medium in which our translators work, the English language, has been in constant flux and neologisms and rarely used terms have been on the rise: from ‘impeachment’ at the beginning of the year, to ‘lockdown’, ‘social distancing’, ‘shelter-in-place’ and ‘circuit breaker’ developing from neologisms to everyday constants; ‘furlough’, ‘unmute’, ‘Zoom-bombing’ and ‘work-cation’ becoming part of our working realities; and ‘Black Lives Matter’, ‘decolonising’, ‘Cancel Culture’, ‘bushfires’, ‘climate collapse’ and ‘net zero’ giving us much food for thought and stressing the need for action beyond this – and I’ll say it only once – ‘unprecedented’ year.

The pandemic has, of course, been a key theme for our translators as well, and has influenced the way we conducted the mentorships programme in 20/21: instead of the traditional residency weekend in Norwich, we all gathered in the Zoom room for a virtual Industry Weekend in January. Beside workshops ranging from ‘how to vet a contract’ to ‘translating scent’, a roundtable discussion on drama translation, and one-to-one sessions with publishers and editors, all participants were also treated to the emerging translators’ reading from their work, the very work you get to sample in this anthology. And just as importantly: all translators – mentees and mentors alike – had the chance to break out of their working-from-home isolation for a few hours, meet other wordsmiths like them, and be reminded that translation is a practice aimed at connecting and reconnecting worlds, cultures, languages and, above all, people.

In this anthology, you will find stories of isolation: a new mother torn between motherhood and her work as an artist; a young woman who becomes the victim of first domestic, then online abuse; a gay man leading a double life in Moscow, interspersed with a retelling of the story of Jesus and Judas; a university drop-out strolling through town at night, imagining the lives people lead behind closed doors. But also small acts of care, kindness and reconnection: an older sister protecting her younger mixed-race sibling from neglect and finding her own strength in doing so; and an emigrated granddaughter reconnecting with her dying grandmother in Switzerland by trusting her with a secret.

Some pieces remind us of the bigger picture: of the trauma of a world haunted by the Mafia, triggered by old photographs; of trying to build a new life on the ruins of a failed regime in Poland, when capitalism cannot provide the answers for what is lost; of the real-life experience of living in, and surviving, the conflict in Syria.

In these extracts from novels, plays, YA literature and real-life stories, we are offered a glimpse outside of our own isolated bubbles into other worlds and life experiences. Literature in translation offers us a broader view of what it means to be human, and what it means to express our humanity through words. We are very lucky to have our emerging translators to put these accounts into English and build bridges for us to break out of our own isolation, if only for a few pages, and reconnect.

Rebecca DeWald
Emerging Translator Mentorships Programme Manager,
National Centre for Writing

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Danish to English

Sharon E. Rhodes

Mentor

Paul Russell Garrett

Sharon E. Rhodes holds a PhD in English from the University of Rochester. She came to Danish literature and translation through her PhD work on Old English. She has translated and revised a number of academic manuscripts, works as a freelance editor, and teaches medieval literature at Portland State University.

Introduction

Sharon E. Rhodes

Olga Ravn's *My Work* (*Mit Arbejde*, Gyldendal 2020) chronicles early motherhood through the experiences of 'Anna' and the reflections of an anonymous 'I'. Sitting somewhere on the spectrum between Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work* and Diablo Cody's *Tully*, *My Work* describes and analyses Anna's journey as an artist and mother from pregnancy through the early years of her son's life via a non-chronological collection of narratives, poems, journal entries, and letters.

A scene from one of Anna and her boyfriend Aksel's prenatal classes is darkly telling: a midwife flipping through a slideshow shouts 'Sex after birth!' when she comes to a slide depicting a man on one island and a woman on another. Inexplicably they are connected by the Golden Gate Bridge: 'Two islands – connected by a bridge in San Francisco.' We get the sense that Anna finds the whole thing comical, yet the pregnancy has already driven a wedge between her and Aksel, and the birth of their son only widens the gulf.

Ravn's exploration of motherhood centres on this gulf between Anna's experience and Aksel's. While other authors, particularly Cusk, have touched on the inequality of mothers and fathers, Anna's struggle with the heteronormativity foisted on her by motherhood is the primary point of tension in *My Work*. Anna and Aksel attempt to set up an egalitarian household, yet, as Anna says repeatedly, they are not equal: Anna is pregnant, Anna gives birth, Anna breastfeeds, and Anna does the bulk of the early childcare and housework. While Aksel quickly returns to his work as a dramatist after becoming a father, Anna must re-forge her identity as an artist after becoming a mother.

My Work, true to the haze of new motherhood, has many beginnings, middles, and ends; this passage comes from the eighth beginning.

From *My Work*

Olga Ravn, translated by Sharon E. Rhodes

After the birth, when they laid the baby on Anna's chest, she felt nothing.

'Congratulations,' said a mouth. Hands were washed. The baby looked up at her with big eyes.

An enveloping white noise, like a woollen mitten, descended on her.

Even though she lay with the baby on her chest, she still saw him in the arms of the midwife, rapidly unwinding the umbilical cord from around his neck.

'Why isn't he crying?' asked Anna; the placenta was delivered, then another doctor was summoned, and then another and another, all of them focused on her injuries.

'Why isn't he crying?' she asked from within the cloud of white noise. The midwife wound up the umbilical cord. At last, he cried.

Anna raised a hand, dark with slime, and observed it.

'So there we have it.'

'Is this shit?' asked Anna.

They took him from her and moved her to a hospital bed in the corner. The humming grew stronger. Somewhere in the distance, the tiny baby was examined.

'Aksel, tell me what they're doing, tell me what they're doing.'

'They're counting his fingers and toes,' Aksel said reassuringly. 'There are ten of each.'

They finished and disappeared.

Aksel took off his shirt and lifted the newborn baby to his naked chest. They lay down on the bed where Anna had given birth. All traces of the birth had already been cleaned away. A fresh paper sheet rustled beneath them.

At the sight of the baby against the man's stomach – the love that already seemed to exist between them, the pride in Aksel's face when he looked down at the boy, the joy she could see but did not share – the droning went from surrounding Anna to penetrating her.

Aksel carefully got up with the baby in his arms and went out into the corridor. Anna lay beneath the window.

She couldn't move. She thought she'd been forgotten.

A new midwife arrived and tried to put the baby to her breast, but he would not latch.

'I need to talk to a psychologist,' hissed Anna.

'We have a priest,' said the midwife. Her face was so big and close to Anna's as she lay in the bed; then it disappeared.

They were transferred to another room. Aksel carried the baby while Anna was supported by the midwife and a nurse. She was warned to not sit down for the next six weeks because of the tearing. The only thing Anna could think of was the white noise. She couldn't speak.

Knowing that the baby had left her body and now existed outside the deafening thrumming sent afterpains through Anna. She wanted to ask to hold him, but the words would not come.

That night they attempted to put the baby to Anna's breasts numerous times; he'd swallowed amniotic fluid and could not latch.

Once the midwife concluded that the latest breastfeeding attempt had failed, Aksel took the baby. Anna was so weak she could barely lift the boy. She couldn't lie down with him for more than a few minutes at a time.

Then a pump was rolled in on a cart and Anna sat pumping every three hours. Everything that was dark was sucked out through a tube, and yet more kept coming out.

At two in the morning, the midwife on duty told Aksel to get some sleep; they wheeled a bed into the room for him. Anna couldn't sleep. The baby began screaming. She couldn't get out of bed. A new midwife came in.

'Should I give him some formula?' she asked.

'No,' said Anna remembering her mother's warning that a bottle could ruin breastfeeding altogether.

'Is your milk coming in?' asked the midwife, shaking Anna's breasts.

'Not yet.'

The scene replayed itself throughout the night.

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Italian to English

Georgia Wall

Mentor

Howard Curtis

As well as translating fiction and non-fiction for adults, working as a children's bookseller has made Georgia especially enthusiastic about children's and YA literature. She fell into translating commercially while working in a hospital in Abruzzo, after studying Modern Languages at Leeds. In 2018 she completed a PhD in Italian Studies at Warwick, where she's currently a language tutor.

Introduction

Georgia Wall

In Palermo, Sicily, at the end of August in the early nineties, five girls unite to face a common enemy. The alliance they form against a formidable gang of elder boys has unexpected consequences.

Agnese, the gang's usual target, is trying to make sense of her father's disappearance now she's no longer allowed to talk about him at home. Agnese's best friend, Aurora, is the daughter of Zio Mimmo – everyone where they live knows who her father is, and that he's not to be messed with. Marialuce 'dreams of a prince dressed in white, with a yellow jacket and Adidas trainers', but with no sign of Freddie Mercury on the horizon she resolves to fight her own battles. Sisters Elda and Marina have had a sheltered life compared to their new friends, until an event one Thursday afternoon changes everything.

In Palermo on 29 August 1991, less than a year after he initiated a public campaign against the Mafia's extortion of local businesses, entrepreneur and clothing manufacturer Libero Grassi is shot dead.

In *La battaglia delle bambine*, Simona Dolce imagines the stories behind a selection of Letizia Battaglia's photographic portraits. At the heart of the narrative is the city of Palermo, as it is lived by the young female protagonists: sensory and compelling, treacherous and inspiring. Thirty years after Libero Grassi's murder, this is a children's book that also speaks to adults, and the far-reaching effects of the girls' pact are a forceful plea against indifference.

It has been a privilege and pleasure to be mentored by Howard Curtis, not least for his commitment to translation as a collaborative endeavour, as well as to meet this network of translators and draw inspiration from their projects and broader approaches.

From *La battaglia delle bambine*

Simona Dolce, translated by Georgia Wall

Tonight, their father is very serious and in a foul mood.

Elda watches his every movement. Marina hasn't noticed; she chirrs like a cicada, chattering non-stop. She's begging their mother to take them to the beach and promising anything and everything.

'I swear I'll clean our bedroom! I'll clear the table every evening and I'll finish *all* my holiday homework!'

'You need to do that anyway,' Ma responds brusquely, 'you mean you haven't already?'

'Idiot,' Elda whispers, 'You reminded her.'

'Er – course I have. All done, aren't we, Elda?'

Elda would like to correct her: actually, *she's* the only one who's finished her homework, Marina hasn't even opened her workbook yet, but Pa snaps at them, 'Can't we just have a minute's peace?'

He never normally speaks to them like that but there's something different about him tonight.

'Look what's happened,' he says to Ma, without taking his eyes off the screen.

A man on the ground, covered with a sheet. The TV shows images of a factory with rows of women operating sewing machines. 'I can't believe it's come to this. It's a disgrace,' he says, staring at the TV. 'They've killed him.'

Elda observes her father. He's clean-shaven, as always. He's wearing a light blue shirt and his tie is neatly knotted. He's elegant and dignified, but now, as he watches the news, Elda notices how he loosens his tie to breathe. His lips are pressed together. It's the expression he has when he's very worried. Elda's only ever seen him this solemn once, when Marina failed her exams. That's why, even though she's a year older, they're in the same class.

The dining room stops being just their home and is filled with the story of the murdered man. On TV they're saying that Libero Grassi was a businessman who'd written a letter to the Mafiosi that were asking him for money. The letter began, 'Dear extortionist,' and then

he'd written, 'I kindly advise our anonymous extortionist not to waste time with threatening phone calls, or money on fuses, bombs and bullets, because we are not prepared to pay you and we have put ourselves under police protection.'

On TV they're saying that this man who's just been killed got eight Mafiosi arrested.

'What's happened, Ma?' Elsa asks.

It's not the TV images or the reporters' comments that scare her. What scares her are her parents' faces, trapped in thoughts that have the enormous scope of adult things. To Elda, it seems like a dark cloud has descended on the room and blocked all the doors and windows, imprisoning them in fear.

It's as if the news and the Mafia and death are suddenly very close to home. Libero Grassi wasn't a relative, was he? Elda thinks.

The screen shows a series of images of the man while he was still alive. Photographs where he's smiling, with a bright, attentive gaze. Interviews where Elda hears him speaking with a funny 'r' that she's never heard before. And she thinks about this man with glasses. As far as she knows, neither Pa nor Ma has a friend called Libero. So why, she wonders, are they so interested in his story? Why does it feel like what she's watching on TV really affects her parents?

'Do you know him?' Elda asks, just to be sure.

'Everyone knows him.'

'Who is he?' she insists.

She wants to understand what's happening, but Ma isn't listening to her now, she's talking to Pa. She's reassuring him.

'Simone, you need to stay calm. If they come back here, I've told you what we'll do. We know what to do.'

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Korean to English

Clare Richards

Mentor

Anton Hur

Clare received her BA in Experimental Psychology from the University of Oxford and MA in Korean Studies from SOAS University of London. She studied Korean in Seoul through the Korea Foundation Language Training Fellowship and first began translating in 2018 whilst working at the Korean Cultural Centre UK. Clare is currently on a two-year scholarship programme at the Literary Translation Institute of Korea. She is neurodivergent.

Introduction

Clare Richards

Another Person unfolds around the story of Jina. After being beaten by her boyfriend, who is also her boss, for close to a year, Jina finally reports him to the police. In the end, the court hands him nothing but a small monetary fine, and so she decides to publish her story on the internet. Though at first, the online community seems to take her side, it is not long before one of her female co-workers posts screenshots of scathing messages written about Jina by their colleagues, and public opinion soon follows suit. Jina quits her job, and spends three months locked up in her flat, scouring the internet for articles and posts written about her.

One day, a particular tweet stops her in her tracks. 'Vacuum cleaner bitch.' A cruel title only a few from her past would know. Jina is thrown back twelve years, to before Yuri – socially outcast at their university for her perceived odd behaviour – died tragically in a car accident. Determined to find the tweet's author, Jina leaves her flat and travels back to her old home of Anjin. It is only then that the events of twelve years prior finally begin to unravel...

One of Korea's new group of 'young feminists', Kang Hwagil has consistently written about women since her debut in 2012. Her gothic thrillers draw strong influences from 19th and 20th-century writers such as the Brontë sisters, Mary Shelley, and Shirley Jackson. What most motivated me to translate this work was Kang's direct and unashamed confrontation of topics from violent assault to everyday sexism, to the complexities in which others, particularly other women, react and respond to the victims of abuse. It has been a privilege to work with Anton Hur, whose guidance, feedback and support have been invaluable.

From Another Person

Kang Hwagil, translated by Clare Richards

Stupid woman.

Today, too, people hated me. I was spending today, like every other day, alone at home, reading articles and comments written about me. The subject this time was 'stupidity'. The pattern in which the disputes unfolded was generally similar. Someone called me stupid, and then the responses followed: she's not stupid, just afraid. No, she wasn't stupid or afraid, she was just a hopeless case to begin with. Then another rebuttal. Look, let me explain to you what 'stupid' means. Haven't you heard the story? The girl dancing in the red shoes. Beanpole legs limping as she walks. The girl who couldn't stop dancing, in shoes she should never have worn. She shouldn't have longed after what didn't suit her to begin with. Should've known the shoes were bad. She had no clue the shoes weren't right for her – you think she would have known her two legs would go up in the air?

That's what stupid is.

These people I've never met know me better than I know myself.

My ringtone pierced the air. Like a disobedient child caught in the act, I blinked and directed my gaze down at the white flashing screen. It was Tana. I looked at the phone for just a brief moment before turning back towards the monitor. I didn't pick up.

I knew what Tana would say. She'd tell me to stop looking at what I was reading. It was obvious. At first, she'd say she'd phoned out of boredom – it was only when the conversation neared its end that she'd bring up what she really wanted to talk about.

Jina-ya, don't pay attention to any of that bullshit.

I always responded that I wouldn't. Then, as soon as we hung up, I'd type my name, 'Kim Jina', into the search engine.

I was aware that what people were saying was bullshit. How could I not be? I just couldn't stop reading. Tana knew my obsession with what other people were saying.

That must be why she made a habit of stressing the same thing every time.

‘Most of them are on your side. You know that, right?’

But today I’m not having any of it. I ignored the phone. It continued to ring. Once. And again. And again. Then silence.

I burst out laughing. I was actually disappointed. I mean, really? I’d deliberately avoided the call, but the moment the ringing stopped, the disappointment I felt was unbelievable. Then came a violent rush of loneliness, a sickness in the pit of my stomach. I’m this predictable, this dull.

Like on that day last summer.

My boyfriend grabbed me by the neck.

Right. It’s a stupid story.

Lately, I’m most envious of the people who think my story is pointless. I, too, want to look at myself and think ‘I just don’t get her.’ To see myself in that same way. To become another person. A person totally distinct from this someone I can’t understand, don’t want to understand. I want to heave a deep sigh and call out my own name.

Jina-ya, come on. Why would you do that?

I wish emotions were something you could choose to feel. The fear that someone might leave me, discarded, without value – I hate that feeling. People have realised the hold these thoughts have over me, and treat me in whatever way they please. I want to stop consoling myself, to stop telling myself that despite all this I’m still okay. I want to harden. To not feel anything at all. What I need is to lie my body on a bone-dry mound of hay. To breathe in the parched, stiff scent of the grass. To have every drop of moisture sucked from me. And then, one day, looking at the dampened heart of another, draw a long breath and ask,

Come on, why would you do that?

Why didn’t you end things?

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Norwegian to English

Alice Fletcher

Mentor

Kari Dickson

Alice Fletcher has a BA in French and Norwegian and an MA in Translation Theory and Practice, both from University College London. She translates Norwegian literature as well as the occasional poem, winning the Stephen Spender Prize for Poetry in Translation in 2018. Her biggest passions are languages, history and dogs – not necessarily in that order.

Introduction

Alice Fletcher

Published in 2013, *Holding My Breath* is Agate Øksendal Kaupang's debut novel. It tells the story of two half-sisters trying their best to stay together after a visit from social services. The narrator, whose name we never learn, is sixteen years old and lives in Oslo with her mentally ill mother and her ten-year-old mixed-race half-sister Emilie, whom she adores above all else. The two sisters have a difficult life: frequently left unsupervised by their mother, they struggle with racism, school, sex and relationships.

Chapters set in the present are interspersed with the narrator's memories; she skips school, gets into fights, sleeps with older men, completely devoid of any parental influence and guidance. Chapters vary wildly in length and this gives the novel a very fragmented and disordered feeling – a clear reflection of the lives of these two sisters. With each admission from the narrator, it becomes clearer and clearer that they are not in anything even resembling a healthy environment.

The turning point for the narrator is when she realises that Emilie has started down the same path that she herself is on. The narrator accepts that they *do* need help, that there *does* need to be an intervention, so that Emilie can have the life she so desperately deserves.

I was drawn to this novel because it touches on so many themes and presents so many voices that we don't readily associate with Scandinavia – these problems of racism and mental health issues, among others, are so easily glossed over in Britain as we seek to idealise and commodify these northern countries.

It has been incredibly enlightening and rewarding to work on this book, and I am so grateful to Kari Dickson for sharing her wisdom, experience and support over the past months.

From *Holding My Breath*

Agate Øksendal Kaupang, translated by Alice Fletcher

We've stopped celebrating our birthdays. Too much pressure. A birthday is supposed to be a happy thing, but it never turns out that way. We celebrate our name days instead. There's no difference, just that I write Emilie's name, and not her age, on top of a cake in delicate, looping letters.

I had to sleep on the sofa so I could wake her with cake in bed. I bought it at the shopping centre the day before. A custard slice: her favourite, and mine too. I shut myself in the kitchen when I got home, making sure she couldn't come in. I put the white box down on the counter and carefully opened it. In a plastic sandwich bag, I mixed together some water and icing sugar with a few drops of red food colouring, and cut a little hole in the corner so I could write on the cake. It was difficult to get hold of her present. The only thing she wanted was a Polaroid camera. I managed to find one on eBay. It takes 600 film, which you can only order from abroad. It's typical of Emilie to want something so unusual. A little machine that can freeze a moment in time, and turn it into something she can hold in her hand.

In the morning, I arrange the cake, present and some plates on a tray. I turn off the lights so that the only illumination in the hallway is the orange glow of candles burning on top of the cake. I wake Mum. She ties her dressing gown around her waist and shuffles sluggishly after me. We sing: *happy name day to you, happy name day to you, happy name day dear Emilie, happy name day to you.*

Mum's voice is high, but so quiet that it's barely audible. We stand in the doorway of Emilie's room. She's pretending to be asleep. I can see it in the creases of her eyelids; her eyes are squeezed too tightly shut for it to be natural. I think that maybe she's afraid to open them and see that Mum isn't there. I make my voice very quiet so that she can hear Mum's more clearly. Emilie opens her eyes. We sit on the edge of her bed. She blows out

her candles, tears open her present and throws her arms around Mum's neck. She kisses and strokes her, almost looks like she wants to climb inside her. I can tell that this overwhelming display of gratitude is making Mum uncomfortable. Perhaps she can't bear to be touched.

Emilie doesn't like to talk about how old she is. If anyone asks, she just says that she's in the last year of primary school, and she's got an older sister in high school. We've stopped celebrating our birthdays. There's no difference. You just don't have to feel guilty if the day doesn't turn out right. And tomorrow, she can proudly tell everyone in class that she got a custard slice and a Polaroid camera for her name day, and no one will wonder why they weren't invited.

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Polish to English

Konrad Zielinski

Mentor

Antonia Lloyd-Jones

Konrad Zielinski is a freelance theatre critic and a part-time MA student in Theatre Criticism and Dramaturgy at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. He was born in Łódź, Poland. He migrated to the UK in 2010 and lives in London. He hopes that through the mentorship he'll be able to popularise Polish drama in performance and publication in the UK.

Introduction

Konrad Zielinski

There was always plenty of mythology around here. Cultivated at breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and supper. As if that is worth so and so. And as soon as communism ends, we're going to be rich. We're going to be happy and independent. Right? But in the meantime, everything has changed.

It's the turn of the twenty-first century. Julian, a middle-aged expat business owner, returns to his family's run-down country estate, restored to them following the country's return to capitalist democracy. But it's not a happy homecoming. Father seems to have gone mad, insists on reliving his youth and appears to have taken up with a young art student. Mother feels betrayed, refuses to move or to speak and communicates only through hand-written notes. And Julian's three younger siblings have their own concerns to deal with. But the estate's finances require urgent attention, as the fate of the house and its grounds are threatened. And the new neighbour, a nouveau riche entrepreneur, has redevelopment plans for the area...

The following excerpt is from the third act (or *Image*, as the author calls it) where Julian meets up with the entrepreneur, Trybulak. Shielded by the cover of the night, they intend to strike a deal. The family is not to know.

Paweł Huelle is hailed as one of Poland's finest contemporary writers. His novels and short stories have been widely translated into English, earning many prestigious awards. He is also an acclaimed playwright, with none of his theatrical output thus far translated into English. I regard his 2001 play *Kąpielisko Ostrów* (*The Lido*) as undeservedly neglected among the rich kaleidoscope of post '89 Polish drama. This drawing-room state-of-the-nation play is a funny and poignant examination of the intricacies of family life, class, and relationships with the past. The play shares many qualities with works popular on British stages today. Very little Polish drama

has been staged in the UK. With its echoes of Chekhov, *Kąpielisko Ostrów* may appeal to British audiences and build a bridge into a dramatic landscape that warrants further exploration.

From *The Lido* (*Dialog*, Issue 2, 2001)

Paweł Huelle, translated by Konrad Zielinski

JULIAN: Well, of course. I can see it's getting harder and harder for us to find a connection too, Mr Trybulak. What a pity. I came all this way, after all. It's almost dawn. Can you hear that? It's the nightingales, by the river. Sleep well, and let's forget the whole thing. Here are your letters. Please return mine.

TRYBULAK: My letters to you pose no threat to me. As for your letters to me, now that's a different story. Especially the one about the family. And the bank account numbers. You're paying taxes in Germany and not here, aren't you?

JULIAN: Are you blackmailing me?

TRYBULAK: No. I'm bringing you to heel.

JULIAN: You can bring your dogs to heel. But not here, in someone else's garden. Goodbye!

TRYBULAK: Please don't go. I need you too, after all.

JULIAN: Is that why you've spent half the night talking to me about God knows what?

TRYBULAK: I wanted to get to know you a little bit better. It's not every day you strike a deal of this kind. Here, this is my share.

TRYBULAK hands JULIAN a package.

JULIAN: What about the bill of exchange?

TRYBULAK: What bill of exchange?

JULIAN: I should sign something.

TRYBULAK: I don't need a signature.

JULIAN: With a sum of this kind? You're either mad, or you had these notes printed yesterday, in some back alley.

TRYBULAK: They're genuine.

JULIAN: I could run away with this and never come back here. I could leave my wife. Maybe I've had it with her? Or I could take her to Mexico, change my name.

TRYBULAK: All in all, it's not enough for Mexico.

JULIAN: What is it then?

TRYBULAK: Simple trust. You hate me. Maybe even despise me. Yes, yes, please don't interrupt, I am after all one of those people who took everything away from you. Well, almost everything. We're ruthless, ill-mannered, churlish plebs who haven't been brought up properly. Isn't that what your mother called us? Didn't she call us the Bolshevik plague? Not only did we introduce our new, barbaric order with the help of a foreign army, not only did we put you in prisons and camps, and sometimes even killed you, we also did it without suffering any harm. And now that you're reclaiming this, that and the other, now that you're returning to your old homes and trying to polish up the frames of the old portraits, what do we find? You haven't got any money. The old manor house, the park, the estate, the apartment block – they all have to be sold. Legally this time, with no obligation. Who's buying it? This Trybulak guy. Of course, dear Julian, it's dreadful, and I can understand how much you must

loathe me – although your upbringing won't allow you to say just how much. But you and I are of the same clay. Why's that? Because we both love the same thing and in the same way. Let me finish. If you were trying to pull off a swindle simply to save this ruin, I'd have never trusted you. But you're aiming so much further. And that's what I respect about you, your dislike of family heirlooms. Do you know what the real difference between us is? It's this: I lived my life without them. I've always had to look towards the future. There was nothing to look back on in the past, except for chicken shit and potato peelings. Yes, that's what a revolution is – when you've nowhere to retreat to, so you have to keep moving forwards. You're the only member of your entire family to have understood that.

JULIAN: I'm truly sorry for you.

TRYBULAK: Why's that?

JULIAN: The past always has its value. Take your father, for instance. If he was able to rebel, that was something. But what about you? You're like a turd floating in our river.

TRYBULAK: That doesn't offend me. You prefer to go with the flow too. But it won't do to mention that in company, will it?

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Russian to English

Reuben Woolley

Mentor

Robert Chandler

Reuben Woolley is a translator from Russian to English, with a particular interest in Russian queer history and its stories, and modern Russian political and liberation movements. He tries to use his work to bring the right people together for the right conversations — be that through Zoom calls or novels.

Introduction

Reuben Woolley

This is an extract from *The Gospel According To*, a 2017 novel by Russian journalist and author Sergey Khazov-Cassia. The novel draws two disparate stories of suffering and passion into rich dialogue. The first and most prominent plotline is that of Eve, a young gay guy living in modern Moscow. Eve leads a habitual 'double life' of a closeted day job and night-times of gay sex, a life which is knocked off-kilter when he takes pity on a runaway teenager and offers him shelter for the night. Several strokes of bad luck leave Eve on trial for a blatantly false charge of paedophilia, with no hope of escape besides blind faith in either the Russian judicial system or the state apparatus – neither seem promising. Interspersed amongst this narrative is a retelling of the story of Jesus and Judas, from the latter's perspective. Based more on the apocryphal gospels than the canonical bible, and not quite like either, these chapters are some of the novel's richest and most intriguing, creating a dialogic dual-narrative on martyrdom, solidarity and passion. The passage given here is a flashback to Eve's teenage years, working at a run-down St. Petersburg hotel in 'the unwashed 90s'. It tells the story of the first time Eve saw a gay couple live in the flesh – no small event for a closeted Russian teenager.

I've been working with the author on this novel since the start of 2020, a translation experience that has been incredibly rewarding. I've been able to meet and work with amazing queer writers and activists in both the UK and Russia, as well as receiving and sharing translation advice and making friends with some of the most talented and friendly people around – thanks in large part to the National Centre for Writing and this wonderful scheme.

From *The Gospel According To*

Sergey Khazov-Cassia, translated by Reuben Woolley

Eve patted down his hair, grabbed the tray and walked ceremoniously across the dark, carpeted corridor. The door was opened by a slim and nimble man of about thirty, in a white hotel gown. He'd just left the shower, his wet hair was tousled and his reddened, sharp-nosed face gave him the look of a sparrow, splashing in a spring puddle. *'Morning'* he drawled in a British accent, and Eve came into the room. On the double bed, which Eve had learned just five years ago was called a king-size, lay the sparrow's friend. He was stretched out, arms splayed, the duvet covering him just up to the waist. Gleaming against the crumpled snow-white sheets, his chest was an armoured breastplate, entirely hairless with carefully forged nipples. He nodded and murmured something close to a greeting, his eyes following as Eve went from door to table, trying not to look at the guest's classical nudity. Just then the sparrow flitted to the bed, caressed the man's face and whispered in a soft, avian voice: *'your breakfast's here, honey.'* These two, Eve realized, were neither friends nor colleagues. He lost his footing a little, causing the teacups to let out a lazy fanfare, then blushed and fixed his gaze on the portly light-blue teapot, turning its gold-tipped spout away with a turkey-like haughtiness.

Eve left the tray on the table and rushed back to the door, terrified of betraying any of his embarrassment and understanding all too well that it was too late, they'd already noticed. For a few seconds he could hold in his head a complete picture of this alien and oh-so-enticing life, which, if he hadn't been dreaming of it prior to this, he certainly began to now. Two people in love with one another, travelling to distant lands and turning up in a downcast and unfriendly city, in a dim hotel which seemed, amongst the aristocratically refined and forever-spotless palaces, like a little unkempt peasant at an exiled royalist ball; these two people could hold each other close in threadbare linens, tousle hair, drink

tea, eat omelette, all while he, Eve, became part of the scenery, alongside the boringly yellow wallpaper, the engraving of a mediaeval knight in gothic armour, and the heavy green velvet curtains, which opened to reveal, behind thick layers of netting, uncleaned glass, and grey snow, the dirty pillars of the building opposite. Eve wanted to become their handkerchief or nail file, to be with them always, to spy on their love, their happiness, their intimacy, which might seem shameless to some, but to Eve it was the best possible evidence of the fact that, behind the curtains, the pillars, the knight's armour, there was life: real, naked, and self-assured in its self-interest. He flew out of the room, and moved as quickly as possible, almost ran through the corridor just to calm down a little; his face was so hot and his heart beating so fast that it felt like if he stopped, he wouldn't be able to breathe. He opened one of the empty rooms, went over to the window, whose curtains had been tied back with weighty golden tassels, threw open the under-curtains and pressed his forehead to the cold glass, so that the barely-visible dusty smudges on its surface fanned out in a spiders' web, and the people, cars and pillars came closer, entering the room, surrounding Eve with their morning gloom.

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Swiss-French to English

Rosie Eyre

Mentor

Sarah Ardizzone

Rosie's passion for books, *livres* and *libros* has taken her from Blackpool's library shelves to a degree in French and Spanish, a Master's in translation, and a career as a freelance translator and editor. Along the way, she has worked in Salamanca, Paris and Madrid, before returning to translate by the seaside.

Introduction

Rosie Eyre

The following extract is from the opening chapter of *Nues dans un verre d'eau* (*Nudes in a Glass of Water*), a short and deliciously quirky intergenerational novel by the award-winning Swiss-French author, Fanny Wobmann.

The book traces the parallel stories of the thirty-something narrator, Laura, and her dying grandmother, Madame Favre, as the two women lay themselves bare in a hospital room. Laura is a watch mechanic back from a summer course in London – having fallen secretly pregnant by a dog walker she met on Brighton's nudist beach. Madame Favre, aka Grandma, is the daughter of peasant farmers and widow of a village grocer, in the final months of a long and tight-lipped existence.

The pair are relative strangers, their millennial and mid-century worldviews seemingly poles apart. Yet as the hospital room turns confessional, and a series of fresh, funny and frank exchanges whisks us between the Swiss mountains and the shores of contemporary Britain, a surprising understanding is born.

This passage ushers in the beginning of Laura's made-in-Britain bombshells. Her story is set in Brighton, but the storytelling is taking place in a deserted hospital canteen, high in the snow-lashed Jura. This is not a tale intended for our ears, but for those of her grandmother, who sits hunched over a mug of scalding cocoa – '*a milky shadow that nobody knows where to put any more*'. But as Laura begins to recount her not-quite love story with a bare-buttocked Brighton stranger, it transpires this 'milky shadow' has her own share of tantalising secrets – as her previously unspoken anecdotes of village life will reveal...

It has been a joy to bring this project to life under the mentorship of Sarah Ardizzone, who has taught me so much about what it means to be a literary translator.

From *Nues dans un verre d'eau*

Fanny Wobmann, translated by Rosie Eyre

What's that you're saying, Grandma? You have this way of contorting your mouth, as if you're about to retch, then speech comes out, accompanied by a patter of glottal noises like raindrops falling on tarpaulin. It turns the stomach a bit. As does the dry, acrid stench of this hospital room. The whiff of cleanliness-at-all-costs, you know, *let's disinfect everything, let's all talk in whispers, let's get you bundled up*. A collective sigh of relief.

I brought you flowers, you didn't really understand at first, thought you were the one who'd bought them and that it was my birthday.

'Snowing, Laura?' you ask me. Or maybe it's a statement, I'm not sure. But it's not snowing. The sun's low, it has scythed off the upper floors of the houses and the town is all askew. It has a wildness about it, brazenly becoming one with the surrounding pastureland. Winter has muddled all the pathways, everything is white, grey and blue, like your hands, whose gnarled fingers are tinkling absently on the tightly fitted bedsheet.

'She's a coloured girl, the nurse, she scrubs my back so hard I'll soon have no skin left on me. She's not very nice, you know, a bit rude like their lot can be sometimes. The other nurses are nice but they don't let me sleep at night. I prefer it when it's a man, have you met Thibault yet? You know, Laura, the woman in the next bed has gone. She's not dead, mind. No, she's gone home, can you credit that? I wouldn't have given her two weeks left to live when she came in, she was a dribbler, oh, there's nothing worse. She smelled, you know. Reminded me of Dad when he used to come in after feeding the pigs. I never got used to that smell. Despite me growing up surrounded by it. Promise you won't let me end up like that?'

I don't know what to reply. I laugh. Because all I know are your silences, your secrets, the veil of restraint that shrouds your existence. Do not disturb. Don't touch. Don't dig too deep. Just edge away as quietly as possible.

Now you're talking to me and your mouth is overflowing.

[...]

'Snowing, Laura.' You haven't stopped to look outside, so focused are you on the act of walking. But it's true, this time it is snowing. Winter has unleashed its forces and the town has surrendered, still cloaked in white and grey right up to the fuzzy lines of the horizon. The symmetry of the streets has lost all sense, snowflakes are swirling, it's mayhem outside and your feet keep brushing along, swish, swish, swish, swish, with rhythmic precision, while I walk alongside you without really knowing where we're headed.

That brushing sound and the smell of your nightdress. I'm not entirely sure I can bear them.

Yet here I am, supporting your arm and presenting you with the mug of cocoa you've been so eagerly awaiting. You blow on the liquid, sending greasy little brown waves crashing against the rim and spilling all over your fingers. I set off for a serviette and watch you from a distance, a milky shadow that nobody knows where to put any more. You take up so much space and yet you're such a tiny thing, sitting there hunched over the plastic table with your candyfloss hair plastered to your head.

We have nothing to say to each other. The silence drives the snowflakes into a frenzy and you look me right in the eye. And so, I begin telling you the story.

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Arabic to English

Anam Zafar

Mentor

Meena Kandasamy

A British Muslim and refugee rights activist, Anam Zafar translates from Arabic and French to give sensationalised communities the space to tell their own stories on their own terms. She is on *The Linguist* magazine's Editorial Board and has an MA in Applied Translation Studies. She lives in Birmingham, UK.

Introduction

Anam Zafar

In the Tenderness of War (2015) is a short story collection by Syrian writer, medical doctor and Russian-Arabic translator Najat Abed Alsamad. It is the third of her five published books. Her 2017 novel *No Water Quenches Her Thirst* won a Katara Prize in 2018.

The stories in this collection were written between 2012 and 2014 – and not only are they short, they are also all true. In fact, every story in *In the Tenderness of War* was told to Abed Alsamad during her work as a doctor and humanitarian volunteer in her hometown, Sweida, in south-western Syria. She has since moved to Germany. Abed Alsamad retells these accounts with all the original details – even names are unchanged – in language driven by imagery, her poetic narration juxtaposed with evocative, frank dialogue. Since the stories are so short – some just a few lines, the longest ones not more than four pages – I like to describe them as snapshots: a multidimensional assortment of the thoughts of women, children, men, city folk, village folk, rich people, poor people, even rich people who become poor; spanning first, second and third-person narration, some explicitly driven by conflict, some in which it simply hums in the background. In this way, the writer exposes conflict as an *individual* experience in which entire countries and populations simply cannot be viewed through a single, zoomed-out lens. The characters are people, not numbers.

The collection is divided into five themed sections. The two stories here are from the section called *Children*. They both elevate the status of a mundane object – crisps, weighing scales – to an item full of significance to the small characters, who I have enjoyed bringing to life in English under Meena Kandasamy's guidance. As you read, I invite you to ask yourself: How often do you zoom in?

From *In the Tenderness of War*

Najat Abed Alsamad, translated by Anam Zafar

Boys

The three boys follow their mother into the examination room. They explore the bleak space, looking around, muttering and getting noisier before gathering once more around the single bag of crisps in the hands of the oldest, who is seven.

'Look at the wound on my oldest boy's face, Doctor, and the burns on his brother's hands and the little one's leg...'

But the boys aren't listening. They're busy scooping up crisps by the handful and shoving them down their throats. The middle one is less skilled at this than his brothers: he uses the stump of his hand, severed at the wrist, to rest his crisp-filled mouth, so no pieces fall out and he doesn't miss out on their delightful taste. Rubbed onto their five hands, their lips and their clothes is the bright red pigment that coats the stale snack.

(This country used to have the most enticing packets of crisps and other snacks, descending from such superb Syrian brands as Kalboz, Chipsana, Candy, X Box, Uncle Chips, Al-Arabi...

But those brands, that packaging, and the joy children would get from tearing open the colourful cellophane bag with their teeth, are all long gone. Now is the time for uncooked crisps sold by the ounce, dished out from the seller's huge burlap sack and piled into a transparent nylon bag. No pictures of Captain Majid are printed on those bags, no Popeye or UFO Robot Grendizer or the smiley Tabboush...)

'Did a missile hit you?'

'I don't know...' (The mother answers the doctor's question anxiously.)

'A barrel?'

'No, not a barrel... There weren't any barrel bombs near us.'

The answer comes from the smallest red mouth,

overflowing with crisps:

'Don't you know, Doctor?! This is from a ground-to-ground missile!'

The doctor takes his time cleaning the wound, and the boy is patient at first, but then starts to cry.

'Don't cry, young man. What's wrong, does it hurt?'

'No, no, doctor, you're taking too long, doctor! My brothers finished the crisps without me.'

Rabii

Rabii wishes that the people passing in front, behind, even above his small self would take notice of him, but they don't. Sitting on a cement block in the middle of al-Sha'rani Street, he immerses himself in his painting.

With his soft handkerchief, he wipes the surface of his glass-topped weighing scales carefully and lovingly. This surface: *this* is his painting, and he will trade its glow for people's attention, barter it away for his dogged dreams. Taking a rest between one wipe and the next, he imagines the shiny glass top attracting a fat lady who, herself, dreams of losing a kilo or two. Scared that her weight might break the glass of his scales – which he borrows from the shopkeeper for fifty liras a day – he lifts his eyes upwards:

'Please God, O God who loves children, make her lose some weight so she doesn't break my scales and gives me five liras.'

'Five, plus five, plus five will make lots of liras. Enough to pay the shopkeeper back, and for some bread and sugary tea. If I've got some left over, I'll buy an ice cream in a cone, and if there's more left, I'll buy some colourful sandals, and if there's more left I'll buy a sketchbook and paints, and if there's still some left I'll save up for a bag to put my books in when I go back to school after summer...'

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Japanese to English

Jesse Kirkwood

Mentor

Polly Barton

Jesse Kirkwood grew up in a remote corner of England's Lake District and studied French and Polish at Oxford University before spending a year in southern Japan. He is currently completing an MA in Japanese Studies at SOAS University of London, and is the recipient of this year's Harvill Secker Young Translators' Prize.

Introduction

Jesse Kirkwood

Aoyama Nanae is the author of over twenty novels, short story collections and picture books, and the recipient of the prestigious Bungei, Akutagawa and Kawabata prizes. *Mado no akari* (*The Light of Windows*), her 2005 debut, anticipates many of what will prove to be recurring themes in her work: loneliness, the difficulty of forming meaningful connections, and the power of relationships between women who defy these odds. Like much of her writing, it is light but not lightweight – Aoyama sketches rather than shades her characters, but nonetheless evokes a sensual, night-time world of complex desire and frustration.

The novel's protagonist, Marimo, has dropped out of university, and now spends her days reading Agatha Christie in a small neighbourhood coffee shop. Mikado, the enigmatic proprietress, offers her a job and invites her to move into a flat above the shop. Marimo spends her days and nights gazing into the apartment of the man who lives opposite or, increasingly, roaming the streets and peering into other apartments. Meanwhile, her feelings towards Mikado are soon a whirlpool of adoration, desire, jealousy and loathing. It isn't long before the arrival of a charming professor threatens to tear their relationship apart.

I first read *Mado no akari* in the autumn of 2020, when the changing of the clocks took me by surprise, as it does every year, and my afternoon walks suddenly became night walks. I would get back from my nocturnal strolls on the locked-down streets of London and read about Marimo slipping out from her own apartment in the middle of the night. As we moved into an uncertain winter in the UK, her anxious solitude and neighbourhood voyeurism clearly struck a chord, but I was also drawn to the fierce complexity of her relationship with Mikado.

I am hugely grateful to Polly Barton for introducing me to Aoyama's writing, and for all her insightful comments and invaluable advice during the mentorship.

From *The Light of Windows*

Aoyama Nanae, translated by Jesse Kirkwood

It was evening when I woke up. The sun, about to sink below the horizon, had lost none of its intensity. Only the colour had softened, so that my entire apartment was drenched a dreamlike orange. My dark skin, too, had taken on the colour of some soft, sweet fruit, and was sticky with sweat where it had been touching the sheets. This felt weirdly pleasant, and I lingered in bed a little longer, savouring that dampness and the last light of the day.

I wondered if Mikado was home yet. I couldn't hear anything next door, but from the apartment opposite came the clumsy playing of a guitar, its sound wavering somewhere between dream and reality. Hearing the melancholy theme from *Jeux Interdits* played that way, one awkward measure at a time, I couldn't help but smile to myself. Even I could have played it better.

I got up and felt the humid evening breeze wrap itself around my naked belly, and then drop away again. I slipped back into my dress, which had been lying in a crumpled heap where I had thrown it off, and stepped onto the balcony. There was no sign of anyone behind the curtains of the apartment opposite. I sat on my usual stool and listened – to the chirping of the birds that had gathered in the trees of the park, the restless hum of traffic, the distant clamour of voices. The faltering guitar mingled with these sounds of the summer as they drifted into one ear and out the other. Not wanting to disturb this precious moment with any unnecessary noise, I just sat there on the stool, breathing quietly.

Behind my blank gaze flashed images of the professor – his grey hair, his spindly body, his dirty leather shoes, his thin-rimmed glasses. These fragments kept appearing and then vanishing again, so that just when I thought I had succeeded in forming his image, it would melt away, dissipating into the summer air with every exhaled breath.

I stared at the apartment opposite, as if looking

to some absurdly mighty and benevolent being for assistance. The guitar playing continued.

That night, again, I went out for a walk. Mikado wasn't home yet. My apartment had felt a little stifling, but in the pleasant evening air my body immediately relaxed. I wondered where Mikado and the professor had gone. I walked from door to door, window to window, like a sleepwalker. I heard someone frying up a late dinner, the hiss of a hot shower, the clunky rattle of a washing machine, screams from a film, and, filling the gaps between these sounds, the droning of the cicadas.

In the apartment where, last time, the man had been watching television alone, I could now see a woman, probably his wife, doing some odd gymnastics in front of her sofa. Her hands were clasped together, her body set in an unnatural twist. Her daughter walked past, fresh from the bath by the look of things, patting her hair dry with a towel. The woman swivelled her head and said something to the daughter, who came back over and plonked herself down on the sofa. I watched all this through a gap in the hedge, waiting patiently for the woman to break her pose.

'Oh, it's you.'

Letting out a short gasp, I turned to find the professor standing three paces away from me. Realising immediately that it would be pointless to invent an excuse, I beckoned him over and pointed to the other side of the hedge. He came over and stood by me, taking in the spectacle of the woman in the window. I felt his elbow brush against mine.

'She's been like that for ages,' I whispered, reverently.

'Hmm.' He smiled at me. As our eyes met, I felt the blood drain from my face.

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