

# A TRANSLATOR'S DIARY: A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF EMMA RAMADAN

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Essay by *Emma Ramadan* — Published on March 12, 2018

## PUBLISHED IN ISSUE 51

What is it like to live day-to-day as a translator? What are the worries and the stresses, the pleasures and the reliefs? How does a translator get by, and where do her projects fit into the rest of her life? In this new year-long feature, translator Emma Ramadan gives us some answers by keeping an open diary about a year her life.

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### JANUARY

I ring in the New Year with a rare feeling: relief. At the end of December I finally receive some long-awaited paychecks and finish off 2017 with money in the bank. I feel like I'm in a good place. I can pay my bills, I can buy a decent bottle of champagne for my friend's New Year's party, my fiancé, Tom, has a friend in town and we can go out to dinner with him without tearing our hair out.

This lasts about two days.

Then the relief of a few projects wrapping up turns into panic over not having enough new projects lined up for the year to come. At the end of 2017, I signed a contract for a project that had been a dream roughly ten years in the making. Truly—ten years! The author I first read in a high school French class, who inspired me to translate so I could one day translate her work. I was finally going to translate her work.

In 2017 I achieved a few other goals I thought it would take me another decade to achieve—translating with some of the people and for some of the presses I admire most—and yet, the amount of time I let myself appreciate and fully enjoy these accomplishments is so short, quickly flooded by the anxiety of needing to do more. I immediately set new goals, ridiculous goals, goals lofty and unattainable enough to guarantee that I won't have to face up to this strange feeling of perpetual dissatisfaction again so soon. And then I get back to work. I spend the first few days of 2018 drawing up a list of questions to ask the author of one of the books I'm working on: Have I misunderstood this expression? What poem is being referenced here? Is this word just a word, or is there a particular significance to the choice?

This business of literary translation, so lacking in glory, for most is a labor of pure love, the benefits mainly consisting in the connections you form with the writers you translate, and the people you meet along the way. But there is also a lot of jealousy and possessiveness. Some translators seek to own "their" authors. Some try to "possess" entire regions of the world. At best it's illogical, and at worst it's extremely problematic. I do not understand it. But I run up against it all the time.

I've been bullied by other translators. When I've been given grants, male translators have texted not to congratulate me but to tell me all the reasons why they think they didn't receive the grant. On top of the sexism, there are more prosaic concerns, like my pitches going unresponded to by overworked publishers. Like translators in general, I'm typically underpaid, and I'm usually not paid at all until I nudge and nudge in email after email. Yet each time I follow up on

overdue payment, I feel immediate guilt and regret: I shouldn't have sent that. They're going to think I'm obnoxious, demanding, they'll never work with me again. Then I seesaw back: No, screw that. They entered into a contract to pay me this money and it's unfair that they've put me in a position where I have to beg for it. It's demeaning. It's draining.

I spent most of last year wondering why I insist on putting myself through it, frequently vowing never to pitch projects again. But to combat all that, I have a crew of female translators I can always talk to. And there are lots of other benefits beyond professional solidarity: I get to co-translate with my fiancé and some other incredible people, watch how their brains work. I've formed strong relationships with many of the authors I've translated. When I travel, there's usually a translator I've met at some conference that I can grab coffee with. And that's something not many other professions can offer.

My fiancé and I opened a bookstore and bar, Riffraff, in December. My life is chaos; I hardly sleep, I eat terribly, and I'm in a constant haze of knowing I have a million things to do without having the brainpower to actually do any of them. I spend most of my time in the store making to-do lists, and occasionally when there's a quiet moment I'll cross some small things off. But I can't dip in and out of translating. It needs my full attention. And so I haven't actually translated anything in months. One of my favorite people I've met through Riffraff is our coffee rep. It turns out she translates Latin in her spare time. I didn't think it was possible for me to like her any more than I already did.

It seems there will never be an end to the ongoing *Vegetarian-gate*. Reviews picking apart Deborah Smith's translation from the Korean of the novel *The Vegetarian* keep coming out, all saying the same thing: the translator was not true to the voice of the original, Korean readers are not happy. And then the onslaught of translators shouting down the reviewers and standing up for the translator. I'm torn on all of it. On the one hand, it's very tiresome. Everyone has different ideas of what qualifies as a "good" translation. The point has been made. On the other hand, I find it really troubling that the second a bad review of a translation comes out, it seems everyone in the translation community rushes to condemn the reviewer. I was supposed to review a translation this month, but truly disliked the book. I thought the story was extremely dull, and the writing style wasn't interesting enough to make up for it. Rather than negatively (read: honestly) review the book, my immediate instinct was not to review it at all, and this instinct was encouraged by others, too. And so I didn't. But aren't we allowed to write honest reviews without fear of translators yelling at us over social media? Without fear of burning bridges with publishing houses or other literary organizations? Why is it that anyone who dares write a negative review of a popular translation becomes a target? This is a problem. Or is it? Should we only positively review translations so that we lift the boat of translations in general? Should we all form a pact to refrain from reviewing translations we don't like? Shouldn't translations be able to stand up to the same criticism as books originally written in English? To paraphrase Rafia Zakaria's recent article in *The Baffler*, "In Praise of Negative Reviews," if "everything is good... nothing at all is good."

I tried to finish all my translation projects before we opened Riffraff because I knew I wouldn't have any time to do them once the business was up and running. I worked my ass off during the spring and summer to finish translating and polishing everything I was working on. In December, Tom and I were both at Riffraff sixteen hours a day most days. Now in January, Tom and I start to find a balance, give each other hours off here and there. In the precious free moments I have in the morning to sleep, shower, get groceries, answer a million emails, the idea of doing any productive translation work seems impossible. Three manuscripts I submitted months earlier are all sent back to me with edits in the same week—the week Riffraff opens. The editors all want the edits back two weeks later. I have one day off a week in which to read through edits on three full-length translations (and do everything else I need to do). I spend every other day thinking about how I have one day off a week in which to read through edits on three full-length translations (and do everything else I need to do). Somehow, I do it.

A few weeks later, another round of edits comes in for the same projects.

## FEBRUARY

For one of my translation projects, the writer has used odd, and seemingly "incorrect" punctuation throughout the book. The editor's inclination is to fix the punctuation. I'm against it. But this is an extremely knowledgeable editor I've long wanted to work with, and so I feel guilty disagreeing. But I make my impassioned plea, saying that this weird punctuation is integral to the author's style. But the author is dead, so I can't ask him. I turn to the author's daughter for confirmation. She has no idea whether the punctuation is purposeful or not. I feel silly. Have I been arguing for the paramount importance of missing periods when really it was just a printing error? My confidence is shattered. My impassioned plea

suddenly seems shameful. I rush to doubt myself. Then his daughter finds the original manuscript. Confirmed: odd punctuation.

This was the first time I had translated a book by a dead author. In 2017 I also translated two living authors I had no contact with whatsoever. It's a strange experience. It sucks the life out of the work in a certain way. One of the biggest benefits of translating for me is forming a connection with the author. When the author is out of the picture, it's just me and the text (and my go-to French friends, whom I ask sometimes for help digging up expressions). It's much more solitary. It's not that I'm looking for validation or gratitude or even a lifelong friend as much as I'm looking for something beyond the page.

Then again, sometimes that comes in the form of the author's daughter. Or even a really good editor. For a translation of Virginie Despentes's *Les Jolies Choses*, I had the chance to work very closely with an excellent editor at Feminist Press, Lauren Hook. There's a lot of dialogue in the book and we spoke the lines aloud to each other over the course of two long phone calls to figure out how a 20-something year old woman would say certain things. She helped turn my language grittier. She changed my *hells* to *fucks*, my *butts* to *asses*. I'm extremely grateful to have such good edits. With a translation, there's double pressure: to do a good job for your own reputation, and, more importantly, to do justice to the author. The weight of both of those things is a constant presence.

I feel that pressure most acutely when it comes to translating wordplay. If an author has come up with an incredible feat of words in his or her text, to lose that feels more than simply disappointing or frustrating—it feels like a failure. In *Les Jolies Choses*, a woman watches a porno titled *J'ai de la chatte*, which translates literally to I've got (some) pussy, but is also an expression meaning I'm lucky. I made a list of relatively subpar suggestions of possible English titles, including Honey Pot, Lady Business, Getting Lucky. I had one idea that I thought was decently clever: Snatched. But the recent Amy Schumer movie of the same title took that off the table. Heroically, Lauren came up with Luck Be Two Ladies—our winner.

I've been on a co-translating kick lately. Tom and I are translating a book together. I thought it would be this stupidly romantic experience. The two of us sitting across from each other at the kitchen table, a lamp on somewhere, each sipping from glasses of whiskey, translating from the same book, bouncing ideas off of each other, reading sentences aloud to make sure our voices are aligned. But really it plays out like this: I do the entire first draft of the translation on my own, sweating in a plastic chair in my bedroom all day every day for three months straight in our 94-degree apartment, while Tom does basically all of the build-out of our bookstore/bar. It's a messy first draft. I'm counting on Tom's second draft to turn it into proper English. But turns out owning a business is hard—who knew? We barely have time to sleep and prepare meals for ourselves, let alone edit a 300-page translation. But there's something about this book; it's awoken something in us. The language grips you and pulls you into another world. And so despite it all, we are finding ways to give it all we've got.

The National Book Foundation announces a translation prize. Translation world is alight on Twitter. Hooray hooray. This is a good thing for translators and presses that publish translations—right? Right. Except, maybe not. As I learn from listening to the Three Percent Podcast, these prizes generally have entry fees that would prohibit small presses from entering more than one or two of their books, if any. If the book makes it into the finalists, the press is then generally expected to pay for the author and translator to attend the awards ceremony. Suddenly a small publisher is faced with having to spend hundreds or even thousands of dollars—and the book might not even win. Unless these fees are waived, the small presses coming out with some of the most interesting books in translation might not have the means to enter, and the prize will effectively favor the bigger houses. So who's really benefitting here? Maybe the National Book Foundation will find a way to level the playing field for the smaller presses. Time will tell.

I've said it before: I don't mind a negative review of a translation. But there is such a thing as a bad review of a translation, as in, a detrimental way to review a translation. For example: saying you "forgot" you were reading a translation as if it's the highest compliment you can give the translator or the book. This would seem to imply that there is something inherently bad about being aware that you're reading a translation. Aren't the slight differences in the ways various languages use words and grammar valuable, interesting, worth reflecting on? Don't we read translations because we understand there is more to learn about writing and language than what English-language authors can offer us?

There was a lovely review this month of a book I translated, that nevertheless made me very uncomfortable in its treatment of the book as a translation. The reviewer praised the author's writing style and gorgeous sentences, then gave the caveat that the book is in translation, and said she was comforted to see on the cover of the book that the author had played a part

in the translation. I'm guessing the reviewer didn't realize that this kind of collaboration between the translator and the author is very typical: I translated the book, and the author generously took the time to read through my translation and offer comments and suggestions, some of which were incorporated into the end product. This happens all the time, but it's not often acknowledged on the cover. Does this mean that any book that doesn't have an author-co-translator-credit on the cover (99.999% of translations) should be called into question? What about translations where the author is dead, or where the author and translator had no contact? Should these books be read with skepticism? I don't think this reviewer meant to cast aspersions on my translating abilities. But it's language like this that subtly undermines the work of translators and reinforces the idea of translation as something that distorts the reading experience, of *translation* as a dirty word. As translators we do everything in our power to write sentences in English that reflect the author's style as closely as possible, to convey to readers the beauty and power in the texts that made us want to translate them in the first place. The only reason we are in this profession is because we love the works we translate. The reviewer's words get under my skin. I sit in a car for thirty minutes with two fellow female translators. We're outside one of their houses and she is supposed to get out of the car and go home but we're caught up in a moment of female solidarity and support, and we know those moments are to be seized whenever possible. They reassure me that there are other people in this profession who are in it for the same reasons I am: an honest love of translating and connecting to others. I imagine a network of lady translators swapping secrets in cars across various cities.

My one day off, a Monday. I'm trying to translate. The cats are meowing. The day slips away. The one quiet room in the house is dark and I won't translate in the dark.

Emma Ramadan is a literary translator based in Providence, RI, where she is the co-owner of Riffraff bookstore and bar. She is the recipient of an NEA translation fellowship, a PEN/Heim grant, and a Fulbright scholarship to Morocco. Her forthcoming translations include *Pretty Things* by Virginie Despentes, *The Shutters* by Ahmed Bouanani, and *Revenge of the Translator* by Brice Matthieussent.

## MARCH

Nathanaël's translator's note for *a body, in spite: a slight philosophy for actors* by Alain Jugnon begins "...if Jugnon's text keeps its parts hidden on the verge of being exposed, the translation arrives with its skirts up." What follows is an exploration of the specific ways wordplay can happen in the French language, how the reduced French vocabulary allows for a polysemy and an ambiguity that English doesn't often permit. This is something I've come up against time and again, both due to the nature of English but also due to the nature of translation, needing to understand the nuances of each and every word before you can know which English word is most appropriate. For example, the French phrase *sans doute* can mean either certainly, without a doubt, or else probably, perhaps. Hilariously, *hocher la tête* can mean either to nod yes, or shake one's head no. Context tends to help, but sometimes I find myself interrogating the author I'm translating about whether a word with multiple meanings was intended to be understood as x or y. The answer, inevitably: both. Translation doesn't do well with ambiguity. How can I translate a sentence if I don't know what the sentence means, if the sentence is hovering between two very different interpretations? How can I pick the right phrase in English, a language that seems to have a word for everything, erasing all ambiguity?

In the first translation I ever did, of Anne Parian's book of prose poetry *Monospace*, there is a word at the end that is perfect in its double meaning. *Foncer*, to darken, or to hurry. In the context of the book, the author was drawing a close to the performance of her work, calling for the *rideau*, or curtain, her words becoming increasingly rushed and sparse as the text tunneled towards its end. Both the idea of the stage lights growing dimmer, and the author asking the reader to hurry, make perfect sense. Which to choose? As always: both. Basking in the generosity of poetry, My idea was to use both, separated by blank space on the page.

Hurry      dim the lights

Poetry can allow for that unexpected duality, that gracious compromise, in a way that fiction or nonfiction often cannot. Sometimes I have to make a choice, and it feels like an entire half of a sentence or word's potential has been lopped off in my version of the text. As Nathanaël says at the end of her note, "The translator has been called by many names, but she can never be accused of having told the whole truth."

Translation used to be my hobby, when I had another job to pay the bills. My stable side-project, the thing I could go home to or spend weekends with, the place I could turn to in secret when there were slow moments at work. I was happy to be spared from that. When my fiancé Tom and I moved to Rhode Island to open Riffraff, our bookstore/bar, for the year leading up to our opening, translation was suddenly my only job. My full-time job. I was a literary translator. I could ease into it every morning. Wake up, make a cup of tea, commit myself to my desk, pull down the blinds so the sun wasn't shining in my face, force myself to sit and translate until I reached a certain point in the book, then let myself get up, pee, shower, eat lunch, watch some reality TV to let my mind rest for a bit, then get right back to it. I would translate until around 5pm, then Tom and I would play board games for an hour before dinner, or have a drink outside and grill. Ever-present that year was the anxiety of trying to get our store open. All I wanted in those moments was for our store to exist. But I erase that part from my memory when I look back on that time with longing.

What do other translators who translate from home wear to work? Do you wear pajamas? Do you dress as if you're going to the office? My daily routine used to be translating in my pajamas until the halfway point of what I wanted to accomplish in that day. Then I would shower and get dressed up. In clothes I would never wear to any office. I would put on a slinky black dress, smooth red lipstick and black eyeliner over my face, pouting at my reflection in the mirror. I would try to make myself feel sexy, like I was going on a date with myself. Maybe because when you spend all day in front of a computer screen, sometimes you need an excuse to dress up. But also, the better I feel the more I'm able to believe in myself. The more I'm able to believe in my intelligence, my ability to do the work, resolve the difficult wordplay, turn a mess of a draft into a living piece of writing. Flannel pajamas aren't going to do that for me.

I think now I'm supposed to identify as a bookstore owner who also happens to translate. Translation is supposed to return to its place as my side project. But I feel like a translator who happens to own a bookstore. I spend at least 11 hours a day, 6 days a week at the store, snatching 30-minute slow stretches to get in a few paragraphs of editing, irked when a customer interrupts me, immediately reprimanding myself for wishing I could continue my work in peace rather than celebrating an opportunity for a sale. I'm still clinging to my identity as a translator and worried that if I let go of it, the hard work I've built up will have been for nothing.

How to explain that translation is the only thing I have right now that makes me feel like me? I don't have time to do the small things that make me healthy or happy anymore, like working out, going to my favorite Providence restaurants, meeting friends at the bar a ten minute walk away, taking advantage of a spare hour to pull a book of poetry from the shelf.

On nights when I close the store, I always clean the toilet. Mostly so that our employees don't have to, a little bit because I don't trust anyone else to do it as thoroughly. But also because that moment alone in the bathroom is sometimes the only chance I have to be alone that day. Making small talk with strangers for hours on end is, for me, exhausting. Closing the bathroom door, knowing I won't be asked for anything for a few minutes, is something I actively look forward to. Three different customers have told me now that the medicine cabinet in our bathroom that we got at a local vintage store is haunted. That there are "things" or spirits attached to it. Normally so afraid of ghosts, I convinced myself this spirit wouldn't want to do me

any harm after watching me get down on my knees and clean the toilet every night. When I was feeling beaten down our first few months, the idea of that presence was oddly comforting. Certain nights I was even tempted to say hello.

I've had to take quite a few train rides recently. I tell myself I'm going to accomplish loads of work during those train rides, and sometimes I do, but mostly by the time I sit down and pull out my laptop I'm just wishing I had thought to download a cheery romantic comedy to pass the hours instead. Most recently, I was on my way to New York and had instructed myself to tackle all the translation problems Tom and I had left for the very end of our co-translation project. One of the main characters crafts poems that contain a secret code for her lover to understand. One such poem uses the first word of each line to communicate that her father has died. All the rest of the poems are incredibly lewd. Thinly veiled porn, essentially, using every other line, or the first words of the lines, to excite her lover in public, secretly. With each draft Tom and I both kept skipping those poems, hoping to pass the buck to the other. Finally, I decided to take one for the team and tackle these poems during my train ride to New York. What I wasn't anticipating was that the train would be full and I would be sitting next to a very wholesome-seeming middle-aged man, making the translating of these raunchy sex poems on my bright laptop screen rather embarrassing. After an attempt at screen-dimming that made the act of translating nearly impossible, I finally passed the buck once again to train-ride-home-Emma and called it a day.

#### APRIL

Co-translating has been an exciting way to continue working despite how busy I am right now. Chris Clarke, who has been studying and translating the Oulipo for years, suggested we co-translate an Oulipian play called *Pas de deux*, *Two-Step* in English. It's a "simultaneous play" written in 2003 as a collaboration between Oulipo members Jacques Jouet and Olivier Salon. It takes the form of two different plays set in two different eras, both of which share a character during multiple acts. This character—Armand—often make use of homographic "hinge" words, allowing his responses to signify something different to either storyline. Chris and I did our best to replicate the original writing process in our translation process. This had us working across the table from each other for certain sections, apart for others, and exchanging one reply at a time by email for another. I learned more about the text because of seeing and reading Chris's translation of it, I grew as a translator from it. And I learned about Chris as a translator, too. On the other hand, when I co-translate with Tom, I feel like I learn about him as a person. Tom prefers the word "beneath" to my "under." He uses words like "selection" that make me cringe. He makes fun of me for saying "corner of the street" rather than "street corner." We have different ways of constructing sentences, different ways of approaching puzzling language. We just finished translating a long novel together. I did a rough first draft of the book, then sent the slop over to Tom with the instructions: fix it. I made it English, now make it good English. Reading through all of his edits added to my understanding of him. It's exciting to learn about him in this way.

There is something incredibly comforting about a co-translation. Someone else has validated your choices, someone else has said "this is a good idea," the potential of being scoffed at has been reduced. And if you are scoffed at nevertheless, you're only half to blame.

This month I was asked to speak at a French studies conference about a possible future translation of Anne Garréta's newest book, *Dans l'béton*, published a few months ago in France. I have translated two of her previous books, *Sphinx* and *Not One Day*. For this panel, I was paired with another Providence-based translator who has become a good friend of mine over the past few months. Garréta's latest book is filled with impressive, innovative language, as is to be expected,

and our task was to speak on a panel about how one might go about translating the book. As we were trying to summon into English the voice of Garréta's narrator, a young precocious girl, my co-panelist posited the idea of one of Sally Mann's photographs, the young blonde girl with the cigarette hanging from her mouth. That photograph instantly and perfectly summed up the voice we needed to recreate in English. I never would have landed on that idea on my own.

My translation partner and I were hyper-focused on the word level, how to translate the narrative quirks of the young girl, Garréta's rampant wordplay, her transformation of language. Before it's our turn to speak, the other two panelists, academics, talk about the actual content of the book, what it's doing, its themes, its successes, in the way that I imagine most academics do at academic conferences. I was blown away by how deep they were able to get into this book, how much they were able to tease out and reveal to us. Immediately the cloud of imposter syndrome settled over me: I'd been resting on the level of the words, the strange spellings, the linguistic play. How could I be speaking about translating this book when I had not gone as deep into its meaning as the others? Would they make better translators than me? Would they do this book justice in a way I couldn't because of their capacity for critical analysis, the connections they're able to make through their thorough knowledge of seemingly every work ever written by a French author? What is it that I bring to the table as a translator who does not come at projects from an academic angle?

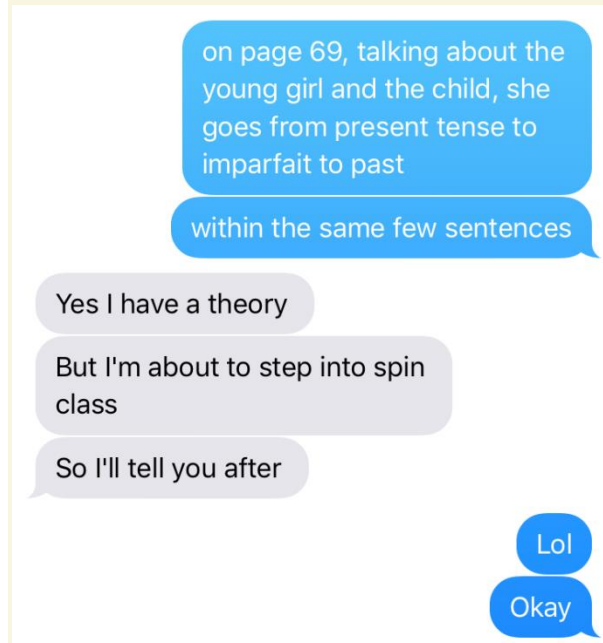
I got a text from Anne Garréta the day before the conference saying she would be coming to Riffraff that night. I was touched, and excited, and terrified. I hadn't seen Anne for years, since I was living in Paris and translating her first novel, *Sphinx*. We used to go to dinner and eat red meat and drink red wine and she would generously explain some of the references and layers in *Sphinx* that I might otherwise have missed. Anne walked into Riffraff and there was a warmth. I wouldn't let our bartender serve her, I wanted to wait on her myself. The bond formed over two challenging translations, all those accumulated hours of thought and energy had served to form between us something unspoken but immediately comprehensible. Something like sisterhood, a mutual trying to share an idea, to get to the same place. And maybe what I bring to the table as a translator is precisely that I come at books from a place of emotion. That urge to translate a book comes from seeing what it can do for a reader emotionally, what it does to me emotionally, how it can impact the way people feel in the world. Garréta's writing is intensely smart, reading her books is indeed an intellectual exercise, they can be unpacked in classrooms for days on end. But it's the way her books make me feel that has led to me spending years translating them into English, binding my words as closely to hers as possible.

MAY

This month I started working on another co-translation with a friend from my masters program who speaks English and French fluently, along with a handful of other languages. She's brilliant and her way with words is something I envy deeply. We split the text down the middle: she will translate and edit her half, and I will translate and edit my half, and then we'll switch and edit each other's, make everything cohesive and consistent, check that we're both calling that character "the child with gray eyes" rather than "the child with the gray eyes" or "the gray-eyed child." It's a treat to be co-translating this book with her. I am in awe of the way her drafts completely consume me. She has captured the rhythm and the beauty of this text and I am modeling myself after her.

She lives in Spain, I live in Rhode Island. When we first started pitching this project, we were both living in Paris. Back then, I had imagined we'd be able to translate together in person, laughing through the hours, getting very little done each day and then rewarding ourselves with bottles of wine anyway, channeling the author's indulgent drinking habits, basking in how glamorous and thrilling translation can be when you're translating an author you love and you're co-translating with a person who jolts you awake and reminds you of why you enjoy doing this.

The reality is that now, with the project finally underway, I'm here in Providence and she's over there in Europe. Different time zones means that as I'm sitting down at my desk to start the day, she's just getting up from hers to put things to an end. I'm walking into the library and she's walking into the gym. One day I text her to ask if she's also working so we could at least send text messages back and forth and blurt across the Internet a phrase we're struggling with.



It's frustrating to feel so out of sync. Half the fun of co-translating is being able to witness the other person's process, hear their thoughts, watch as they replace words with others that feel more right—or at least less wrong—struggling and breaking through together. She is on vacation in Capri while I'm translating from the bar at Riffraff on my off-hours. We finally work out a time to talk on the phone. It turns out since we last spoke both of us have had to deal with the aftermath of a burst pipe. The worst kind of burst pipe. In the end we were more in sync than either of us had thought.

Emma Ramadan is a literary translator based in Providence, RI, where she is the co-owner of Riffraff bookstore and bar. She is the recipient of an NEA translation fellowship, a PEN/Heim grant, and a Fulbright scholarship to Morocco. Her forthcoming translations include *Pretty Things* by Virginie Despentes, *The Shutters* by Ahmed Bouanani, and *Revenge of the Translator* by Brice Matthieussent.

June I got married. I wrote my wedding vows between selling books to customers at Riffraff, and then at the end of July we were off on our honeymoon. I didn't bring my laptop with me, I didn't bring anything work-related, or tried not to. I brought seventeen books, five Tuesday crosswords, and six black linen dresses. Unintentional uniform dressing, like Marguerite Duras used to do. I stared at the ocean our entire time in the South of France, like Marguerite Duras used to do.



The sea. The sea. I'm working on a co-translation of a Marguerite Duras book this summer. It's about the sea, and a young boy and girl who meet and fall in love by the sea, and Duras and Yann Andréa, who meet and fall in love by the sea, and a young boy and the shark who carries the boy through the sea, and Marguerite Duras staring out at the sea from her window in Trouville.

But mostly it's about the sea. The sea. It. Her? Elle. Elle, la mer. She. It? I go back and forth with my co-translator, Olivia Baes. The sea feels like a character in the book, an overwhelming presence, the insistence and repetition of *elle* in Duras's book feels like it carries something more than the English "it." But there are sentences that call out for "it" rather than "she." My ear tells me certain places don't sound right with "she." And would it be too jarring for readers? Would it be putting too much into the English text that isn't in the French? Or is this extra emphasis present for French readers, and by not making the sea "she" in English, we'd be denying something from English readers? We read an interview with Duras in which she refers to the sea in English as "she"—but Duras didn't speak English fluently, maybe this was a mistake on her part. A mere mistake. Like the printing error we only spot in one of her articles when Olivia miraculously happens upon the original version of the text in a doctor's waiting room. Who's to say?

Flicking back and forth between these two versions of the sea, I happen to read *The Iliac Crest* by Cristina Rivera Garza, in Sarah Booker's translation, for the Riffraff fiction book club. There it is: the sea, she. This same sea. This same motherly force, overpowering entire pages of the book, commanding personification, reaching beyond the limits of "it." Does this mean we can, too? Do we have permission? Someone else has done it. No one in the book club found it jarring. Are we too quick to decide that readers would find it distracting, odd? Even so—those sentences where "she" doesn't fit loom heavy.

I reread our translation and the phrase "thousand-year-old" jumps out at me. The same phrase appears in the book of poetry by Ahmed Bouanani that I translated, *The Shutters*. I check the French in both books: not the same phrase in the French. But the same in English. Am I bringing Bouanani into Duras? Am I carrying traces of previous translations into new books like breadcrumbs, leaving a trail of all the authors I've worked on?

Back in Providence post-honeymoon, Olivia and I set ourselves a Skype and editing schedule. I thought I wasn't working over the honeymoon, but when I reread our passages about the sea, I feel things clicking into place. In long passages about the water, the churning of the water, the way the water moves, I reread certain sentences and realize they mean nothing to me in English. The image has been lost. I've read these sentences at least five times and I didn't even notice before that they didn't mean a thing. But now I can see Duras's images clearly in my mind. "Collapses that sealed back up the moment they transpired." What the hell does that mean? Ah, it's the sea. The way the sea retreats into itself, sucks backwards, leaving a hole that is then immediately filled back up again, its violence erased by its continuous movement. "Crevice filled back up the moment they opened."

In Kate Briggs's *This Little Art*, she talks about how *the timing and circumstances of my reading, the books I am reading the book with, the people I am talking to about it, who might make me think differently all play a part in translating a book... The translator collaborates with the prose she is translating...and let's say, also, with time, with the moment of her work and the new circumstances in which it appears, to enable your relationship to the book, your sense of what it is, and of how it was written, and the person or people who wrote it.* I watched the ocean and its (her?) waves for ten days straight on vacation and it turns out I was working the whole time. What does my honeymoon have to do with translation? Or the ghost in the Riffraff bathroom? Or Kate Briggs's zumba class? Or Olivia's spin class?

When Olivia and I are Skyping and come across a problem in the text, a place where something sounds off but we're not immediately sure how to fix it, I feel it in my back. A sharp pain, suddenly, in the same place each time. A literal ache to get the sentence right. As Briggs says, *I read with my body, I read and move to translate with my body, and my body is not the same as yours.* If we resolve

the problem, the pain disappears just as quickly. Sometimes we leave it “for later” and I can feel traces of that ache the rest of the day. Translators as real people, with bodies, with gut instincts, that play into how we translate, that determine which of a hundred possible synonyms we ultimately choose.

I feel also, in my body, something like butterflies as we inch closer to the magic of certain lines. The same butterflies I feel when reading the French. Are they there yet in English? When I read “They walk along the whiteness, on the nakedness, on the beach,” the butterflies are there.

Butterflies because the sentence I fell in love with in the French is giving me the same feelings of possibility in English. But also butterflies because in that moment when we recreate Duras in English, I feel slightly more like myself. This translated space, somewhere in between me and Duras, Duras and Olivia, me and Olivia, as a space where I could be anything, and so maybe I could be me.

I develop a habit of online shopping after every few pages of editing. I scroll through pages of dresses that I’ll never buy, but that I could buy, and that could make me feel like some other version of myself, something closer to the “real” me—if only I had this dress or that watch, I could be more like me. When I read Duras, her words set off something in me, awaken some truth. Me? Or the me I could have been had I done x instead of y at a given moment in my life. Not the book I would have written, but the person I could have been. Am I falling in love with the text, or with myself as I translate it?

We translate a short text by Duras about translation, in which she describes the act of translating as *rigoureusement personnelle*, rigorously personal, and *même, s’il le faut, aberrante*. Possible translations of *aberrante*: abnormal, strange, unusual, weird, aberrant, aberrational, absurd, outrageous, ludicrous, untenable, deviant. We choose deviant. Or rather, I choose deviant, and Olivia approves. Presented without context, you might find this odd. And yet none of the above adjectives are more or less wrong or right than any others. Which word would another translator have chosen? What does it say about us that we’ve chosen this one?

In her book, Kate Briggs quotes Barthes, who says, *every work I read as desirable, even as I am desiring it, I experience as incomplete and somehow lost, because I didn’t do it myself, and I have to in some way retrieve it by redoing it...I want to add myself actively to that which is beautiful and that I lack; as we might put it with an old verb: that I require.* Reading Duras makes me ache. Not the back ache that indicates to me something is off, but another kind of ache, a lack, a lack of me in the text when I identify with it so deeply. A dull ache that is both exacerbated and quieted as I rewrite it. What Briggs describes as *occasions for inappropriate, improbable identification*. Who am I to identify with Duras? And yet I feel it in my body, my stomach, my bones. And how else to cope, if not by translating her words?

When I first read Marguerite Duras’s *Moderato Cantabile* for my high school AP French class, an alarm went off on me. That I was reading the words of someone who understood love in the same way I did. At that point in my life I hadn’t yet experienced love, but it didn’t matter. It was a foreshadowing of what was to come, of what I already knew to be true. The next year, in a college French class, I read Duras’s *The Lover*. From the first page (*J’ai un visage détruit*) I saw myself again. I felt recognized. But even as I was, in Kate Briggs’s words, *underlining, typing the passage out, capturing it on my phone...even in its plenitude, even as it is right now filling me up, there is, I feel, something missing. What is missing is me: my action, my further activity...the audacious counteraction—of the active force that is me.* Perhaps in reading these words, the ache that opened up in me was not from identification but from feeling that this writing wouldn’t be complete until I had acted my own force on it. The drive to translate—not for glory, not for recognition, not for money (obviously): to complete the text (in my eyes) by adding my own force to it. When I read a given book and feel the jolt Briggs describes as *a matter of intensely felt identification*, it’s not the text, it’s me in the text. In the words of Duras (in our translation of her), *What moves me is myself.*

Is this the way out of the binary of the hubristic, overly intrusive translator and the docile, invisible, glossed-over translator? Is this what lies in between? The translator who identifies with the text, sees herself in the text, recreates the text in English through that connection, acts out

her force on it in a way unique to her, in a way no one else could. With no desire to change the text, but simply to replicate it in order to honor her connection to the original, to preserve the feeling the original gave rise to. Why distort that? Why not seek to emulate that jolt exactly? *The pull of the sentences she has written, and what they call forth*, as Briggs says. Do you feel something when you read the translator's English words? Do you feel the jolt? This is the work of the translator. Not the words but what the words call forth in you in English.

As Olivia and I translate together, we frequently clash over whether the text is too French or too English. Olivia, a native French speaker, listens for Duras's French rhythm in our English translation. At first, out of a sense of embarrassment at my French not being as good as hers, I take her lead on almost everything. I am a pushover. But in the second round, I start to fight back. I try to pull the text into an English that sounds natural to me, an English that's not clinging to the French quite so tightly. What to Olivia seems like disrupting Duras's rhythm feels like a necessary way for me to create a rhythm for Duras in English. We dub our argument over whether or not to use dashes for clarity (where the French doesn't need them, and Duras didn't use them) the "dash clash," and my attempt to delete 90% of the "that"s throughout the text the "that spat." As might be obvious, we are loopy by the time we get to our final round of edits. We leave passive aggressive comments for each other in our Google Doc and then laugh about them when we Skype. "I was hangry when I wrote that," Olivia admits one morning. Over nearly a year and many drafts we pull it back and forth between us until we find a compromise that feels and sounds right. The day we turn it in, Olivia says she knows we're done because it sounds like Duras, and not like either of us.

Olivia and I are lady translators. But we're not the lady translators of Briggs's *This Little Art*, defined as *those translators apparently at liberty to pick their projects, to follow their inclinations... those translators who are materially enabled to spend their time writing literary translations*. This image is perhaps even more dangerous than the idea of translators as robots or machines. This perception of translators as independently wealthy, with nothing better to do than pick up translation as a hobby to pass the time. Or the idea that most translators are academics with full salaries who take on translation projects on the side. There are indeed "lady translators," and there are indeed academics with professor's salaries who also take on translation projects. But this isn't true of all translators, and this perception can be harmful for the rest of us. Like many translators I know, I depend on literary translation for most of my income. Translation work pays my bills, buys my groceries, feeds my pets, puts gas in my car. So when a publishing house is several weeks, or months, late in paying me, it keeps me up at night, throws my life into panic. I lie in bed happily dozing off and then am reawakened with a start when I remember that in the morning I have to send yet another follow-up email about payment long overdue. Why should that anxiety be just another part of the job? The idea that as translators we should come to expect and accept this is, frankly, infuriating. I am a translator: *not an impersonal transferring device, but a person*.

I think this is why Briggs's book *This Little Art* has had such an impact on me, and has been rightfully praised as a necessary addition to writing on translation. Her book examines translation as a project undertaken by real people. It looks at what translators might feel, and how this can play into our work. It examines translators as people who exist within a given time, whose personal lives might play a part in how they approach their work. Translators as existing within a given context where priorities and aesthetics are shaped by that time. Translation as a space that is open to challenges and growth and *againness*, where to try to make any claims about what is "right" or "wrong" or "successful" or "failed" in translation is, frankly, ludicrous. When I had the privilege of taking Kate Briggs's translation workshop as part of my Master's in translation at the American University of Paris, her class was the space in which we actually practiced translation, rather than just talking or reading about it. Because theorizing is all well and good, but what we think is only part of how we translate. What we feel, who we are, how we write, makes up the other parts.

Olivia and I have both recently adopted puppies. In the middle of our Skype editing sessions, often one of us needs to take a break to let the dog out. In the middle of a chapter, I help her research how she can train her dog not to bark at strangers, and she reassures me that my

dog's loose stool is a normal part of her adjustment period. Beyond our new dogs, we're both going through a lot of the same personal and professional issues, coincidentally, and when we Skype, it's as though, in Briggs's words, she *had gone from standing across the room to all of a sudden holding [my] hand*. One day, Olivia laughs guilty about having just accidentally thrown away the bowl of guacamole her boyfriend had spent a long time making. I comfort her by telling her that a few weeks before my wedding, I absent-mindedly threw away my birth certificate and almost wasn't able to get my marriage license. A few months ago, both of our pipes burst, and it seems like every day new parallels spring up between us. A kind of *folie à deux*. And what is co-translation if not passing the same hallucination back and forth?

I've been dancing around this final diary because I've been trying to take myself out of it. But translation doesn't just happen. It's a ball getting tossed from person to person, it's breathed on, dropped, stabbed, reinflated, pushed aside, rubbed in the sand. Why shouldn't we know about the translators who put words on the pages of the books we love?

I started this translator diary almost a year ago. A year later, and the bookstore bar I opened with my then-fiancé, now-husband Tom is about to celebrate its one-year anniversary. I imagined that by this time, I would be working at Riffraff half-time and translating half-time. This is not the case. A year later, Tom and I are still working enough hours to feel worn thin. A year later and I am still unable to find the time to prepare healthy meals, to have anything resembling a work-life balance. A year later and I've grown to fear the under-eye circles staring back at me in the mirror are permanent.

A year later and we have regular customers! Customers whose presence immediately puts a smile on my face, lets me breathe a sigh of relief. Customers who ask questions that are far too personal, but I answer anyway because as the owner I think I'm always supposed to be polite. A customer who buys the small press book of translated poetry from Syria that I thought would never sell, but that I insisted on keeping on the shelves because it deserved to be there. Customers who now feel like friends. Customers I hang out with at the dog park. Customers who've met our parents. Customers who've been in our home. Customers who bring us honey or limes when the bar runs out on a busy night.

A year later and Tom and I finally have nights off together, so we can actually see each other outside of the store. Most nights we are too exhausted to do anything but watch the Great British Baking Show, but in the past year we've managed to go on a few dates. A few weeks ago I convinced Tom to go to a bowling alley that serves specialty, syrupy cocktails. I ordered one blended with whipped cream, it was a sour yellow color. He drank beer.

A year ago I was sneaking translation work in between customers, managing to translate entire chapters, entire books, in the accumulated quiet hours just after the store opened. A year later and I'm too exhausted to translate at the store. I can edit, I can identify problem areas, but I can't translate. I can tell that I don't have the brainpower, and that if I were to try, I would produce a first draft so lacking in feeling that the translation wouldn't be able to recover. Now I translate on my mornings off, after the dog has had sufficient exercise. Sometimes I spend my time at the dog park thinking about how I should be translating. But then my dog comes bounding over to say hello with what I believe is a smile on her face.

A year later, I've switched from feeling like a translator who also owns a bookstore bar to feeling like a dishwasher who translates in her free time. A year later, I still feel like I should be doing more. I still clean the bathroom every night I close.

As a grad student, I wanted to write a paper on Translation and the Body. Eventually I was forced to abandon the topic because not enough other people had written about it. I had very little to pull from, and was supposed to base this paper on research; it was not meant to be a creative writing project. I was surprised to learn that more translators hadn't written about their bodies' role in their process. We use our bodies to write, to type, to think, to read aloud, to listen, to gauge by our gut whether or not a sentence is right. Why is it that theory tends to be so far removed from our physical form? At best we get a phrase here about translation as erotic, a line there about translation as cannibalistic. In a brief translator's note at the end of Hilda Hilst's *Fluxo-Floema*, Alexandra Joy Forman writes, wonderfully, "I became the 6th star in HH's perfect pentagram, and she ate me up. Such was translating the master."

When a sentence isn't right, I feel it immediately in my back. I've said this before. Sometimes I can't type fast enough to keep up with my thoughts and a specific word disappears from my train of thought forever. Sometimes my body has enough energy to take me to a translation workshop at a friend's home and my translation is changed for it. Sometimes my body is tired from my day job and I work half as quickly as I used to. Sometimes my body catches cold and my brain muddles words on the page. Once I had a translation deadline to meet but I had just had my tonsils removed and could barely make out the page through the muck of medication. I realized shortly after that I had wound up with something that was half truth and half lie.

At Riffraff, we host an event to discuss my translation of Virginie Despentes's *Pretty Things*. I am in conversation with a local trans woman and activist, who quite fairly makes the point that while Despentes's book has been lauded as a feminist critique of the ways in which the beauty industry corrodes our confidence and distorts our sense of self-worth, what is left out of this book and its surrounding discussion is that this lens of feminism is not universal. The beauty industry is a literal survival toolkit for many trans women. A necessary component of their ability to navigate and survive an often intolerant world. The book was written in a time period when trans activism was not at the forefront of the conversation the way it is for today's readers in America at the end of 2018. But this is what happens when it takes a book twenty years to be translated into English. In this vein, I've been asked several times why, in my translator's note to Anne Garréta's *Sphinx*, I refer to the characters whose genders and sexes are not identified as "he or she" rather than using "they" to allow for the characters to be gender nonconforming. The answer is that when the book was written in 1986, Garréta was not tackling the question of gender fluidity. Garréta's aim was to dismantle the binary between the male and female sex, to put on display the inanity of the idea of "difference" between the two sexes. But for many American readers today, that particular argument leaves a lot of people out of the conversation. Following the Despentes event at Riffraff, I wrestle with feeling that I've somehow betrayed the book by letting the conversation touch on its shortcomings. But why shouldn't we be able to revel in a book, celebrate its strengths, while simultaneously acknowledging that because of its context and when it was written, there are ways in which it might fall short for today's readership? I strive to always feel comfortable with and encourage this kind of critique, a critique which is specific to the process of translation, with books often coming out in English many years after they were first published in their original country.

A year later and I wish critiques of translations across the board more closely resembled this sort of discussion, rather than narrowly focusing on, for example, a translator's specific word choices or mistakes. What translators have been arguing for years is that the kind of critique that focuses solely on a few word choices the reviewer thinks they would have translated in a superior way is simply unproductive and does not amount to a quality review. No one knows the book better than the translator. Perhaps what looks like an odd word choice was a decision arrived at after much back-and-forth between the translator and the author. I recently read a review of a translation in which the reviewer questioned a translator's choice for a character's nickname—seemingly unaware that the translator had written quite a bit in their translator's note about how they had come to that specific decision.

In the last year, there's been a renewal of the age-old debate over accuracy in translations, featuring a few incendiary claims that translators do not value accuracy as much as they should. If you find errors in a translation, that doesn't mean there's been a lack of striving for accuracy. Just imagine how hard it is to be perfectly right in every instance, for all of the many thousands of words a translator shapes into a book. Would any translator, critic, or author be willing to bet their life that there's not a single mistake in any of their published work? The idea that there is any translation in the world that does not contain a single mistake seems ludicrous to me. We're only human, and when editors can't speak the language of the original text, inaccuracies are that much less likely to be caught during the publisher's editing process.

As translators who take pride in our work, we grasp the value and necessity of accuracy in translation. As I understand it, the translation community is rightly upset over the tendency to point out one or two small mistakes a translator might have made, because this does not add anything to the critical conversation and in fact often distracts from it. In such cases, it would seem that it's more about the critic feeling superior than any critical rationale that engages with the book itself. Of course it's fine to make such a critique if a translator has made so many mistakes that it has changed the essence of the book, but if that is not the case, honestly, what exactly is the point of bringing up those mistakes?

I first began to see the resurgence of this idea that translators do not value accuracy a few months ago when translators pushed back against a review that grossly mischaracterized a book about translation. The book in question sought to explore the nuances of a translator's work that had helped turn an author into a worldwide bestseller, in spite of inaccuracies that were later discovered. (I should note that this exploration made up only a small portion of the book in question, but the review did not engage with anything other than this portion.)

When some in the translation community cried foul, we were told that we couldn't stand to see anything bad said about a translator or a book on translation, that we were policing criticism about translations. I was personally told this more than once by men who openly admitted to not having read the book in question. Our words and ideas have been so insistently distorted that these rebuttals are beginning to feel a bit like gaslighting.

When I was asked a few weeks ago to start thinking about writing this final diary, I was on my way to a talk by Édouard Louis at Brown University. His talk was called "Against Useless Literature: What Can Literature Really Do?" It focused on the idea that writers should start by asking the question, "Who is not here?" Who is not being represented? Writers must fight the state of absence. Louis's own autobiographical books were written to drag the real bodies around him, the real bodies of his family members, those who have suffered the things his family has suffered, out of absence. He asks, How dare we write about anything else? How can we write about anything else without shame? Shame should precede every word written, he says, so that we might build a better world. Shame should constitute the invisible foundations of literature. We must use literature to spread shame over the world, to destabilize the world, to undo the social order. And as readers of this kind of literature, we will then be forced to confront an important question: What do I do? Now that I've discovered these bodies and what is done to them, what do I do about it? We all have the choice to do something or to do nothing. To write about those absent, or to write about what's already been written. Rather than books as an escape from reality, reality should be shoved in our faces.

Listening to Édouard Louis's talk is the closest I've ever come to understanding why I translate. There are so many absent bodies, absent books, absent stories. We desperately need those bodies, books, and stories in English, in the U.S. I believe that. This is why I translate. I feel shame on behalf of others when I hear about a book that does nothing but elevate the status

quo. As a translator, I am trying to ask who is not being represented, what kind of literature is not being represented, and then I try to fight that absence. As a bookstore owner, too, I try to fill our shelves with the stories of underrepresented people.

A year ago when I wrote the first installment of this diary, I had five published translations. Now I have ten. I am working toward tipping the scale between “emerging translator” and “established translator.” I am solidly in between. I am trying to work for more houses and for more pay. I am trying to hone my skill and narrow my focus. I am trying to learn what kind of book makes me the happiest to translate, what I’m best at translating, and which books tick both boxes. I am trying to learn how to translate while also being good to my other job and to my husband and to my cats and to my dog. And to myself. And to my body, which allows me to translate.

One very exciting thing about the past year was seeing how many adventurous and exciting books have been written about the act of translation. For instance: *This Little Art* by Kate Briggs (Fitzcarraldo Editions), *Transgressive Circulation* by Johannes Göransson (Noemi Press), Mark Polizzotti’s *Sympathy for the Traitor: A Translation Manifesto* (The MIT Press), Karen Emmerich’s *Literary Translation and the Making of Originals* (Bloomsbury), and *Translation as Transhumance* by Mireille Gansel and translated by Ros Schwartz (The Feminist Press). It’s wonderful to know that translators are being given more space to write freely about their craft in forms that can be brought into the classroom, balancing the strictly academic theoretical texts I was assigned as a student. And there have also been articles in mainstream publications in which translators have explored their work in utterly personal (even bodily!) ways—I greatly enjoyed Lara Vergnaud’s [piece](#) for *The Paris Review* on translating Ahmed Bouanani’s *The Hospital*, detailing how her own body started to mimic Bouanani’s body as she translated his work.

Clearly I’ve been thinking a lot about bodies in translation this year. Right now I’m translating a book in which one of the characters has a sex change. In the aftermath of the surgery, she is lying in bed, wondering why she isn’t feeling better following this long dreamed-about change. She is engaging in a conversation with her former self, the young boy she used to be. In French, because adjectives and verbs take on agreement with the gender of the person they apply to, this portion of the book has a lot of play with language as this character struggles internally with how to identify. As she addresses her former self, she asks at one point, *Tu es sérieux ?* Are you serious (masculine)? The boy replies, *‘Sérieuse,’ tu veux dire. Je suis toi—tu l’as oublié ?* Serious (feminine), you mean. I am you, or did you forget? There is a confusion of agreement to mirror the confusion of identification. It’s masterfully done, and something I’m not able to replicate with the English language. I categorically refuse to do something like, Are you serious, man? Serious *ma’am*, you mean. That feels cheap and inelegant. And I want English readers to see, to access, this aspect of the French language. To see what French can do, how language can reflect, or fail to reflect, someone’s reality. How language can evoke an internal panic, a destabilizing effect on a person’s psyche, a specific kind of violence. I have left this part of the dialogue in French. I am not opposed to the idea of leaving foreign text in a translation. As Johannes Göransson says in *Transgressive Circulation*, “While there is a desire to maintain boundaries, there is also a great pleasure in flooding borders, troubling boundaries, contaminating systems.”

In the same book, one of the characters who has long lived in Paris insists she feels French, although she has no French passport. No one can take that away from her. I find myself in the opposite situation: I am a French citizen, and yet to claim to be French would be ridiculous. I’ve lived in France for an extended period, I speak the language and know a great deal about the culture. But I am not French, except by official document. I have no right to call it my own.

So what am I then? My father is Lebanese, and I look Lebanese, but I’ve never been to Lebanon. My mother is English, I’ve spent a lot of time in England, adopting many of my mother’s British habits. But I don’t feel English either. Growing up in Southern California, my parents stood out. I stood out. I knew that as soon as I turned eighteen and went to college I would leave California

behind, and then after college I knew I wanted to leave the U.S. I've never really felt American. I've always been somewhere in-between. And maybe that's why I've been so drawn to translation for so long. Floating between books and countries and bodies and worlds. Who am I when I am absenting myself through translation? Where do I go, what do I become?

When I translate, my self is suspended. I am trying to inhabit the voice of a character within the voice of an author. I am twice, sometimes more than twice, removed from myself. I am switching between people who are not me, between books that do not tell my own story. And it's a somewhat electric feeling—who I could be if I were to translate myself into oblivion, if I were to fade myself away, come out the other side. I think I'm trying to get closer to something, but to what? *Folie à deux* as a hallucination passed back and forth between me and myself.

In one of the best books I've read in the last year, *Paradise Rot* by Jenny Hval and translated by Marjam Idriss, Johanna, a foreign exchange student from Norway living in an English-speaking country, says: "In short spurts I told them my name and where I was from, but every pause was too long and the syllables too short. The language grated on my throat.. When I finished, I was almost certain that I had said something else, a different name, something wrong. I suddenly knew nothing about myself, nothing seemed right in English, nothing was true." How to be true in translation? How to be ourselves in translation? How to find ourselves through translation when sometimes it feels as though we are doing our best to be erased? Joanna again: "Maybe it wasn't the house, but me that was porous, I thought. Maybe I had to grow a thicker skin in this town."