TRANSOM ISSUE 3: ŠALAMUN IN AMERICA

[wherein we explore the work of Tomaž Šalamun and the poets who translate him]

Metka Krašovec, Trojno ogledalo (Triple Mirror)
acrylic on canvas, 1992, 145x160 cm.

SPRING 2012

Notes on Šalamun in America

In "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin claims a central position for the art of translation: "of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own."

Tomaž Šalamun has been a major figure in American poetry since the 70s, which is an unusual situation for a poet writing in a foreign language spoken by only around two million people. He has loomed large in the personal poetic landscapes of, now, several generations of young American poets: as a figure of permissions, and as an envigorating estrangement of the American aesthetic that has its roots in Whitman. In a way, since estrangement is the prerequisite of rediscovery, Šalamun has functioned in American poetry as a foreign conduit back to something quintessentially American; like translation itself, he has shaped the “maturing process” of English even as he himself is shaped by it.

And yet very little has been made of the fact that Šalamun's work comes into English predominantly through a collaborative process between Šalamun himself and a series of young American poets, most of whom have little or no access to the original Slovene. (Benjamin again: "But do we not generally regard as the essential substance of a literary work what it contains in addition to information – as even a poor translator will admit – the unfathomable, the mysterious, the ‘poetic,’ something that a translator can reproduce only if he is also a poet?") There is an obvious benefit to being translated into English by someone who has a rich and nuanced relationship with the language. But what happens when Šalamun is co-translated by eleven poets who each take on different poems, developing in their various sub-sections of his corpus their own distinctive (collaborative) voices? The Šalamun we know in English is in fact a kind of sybil, a voice composed or channeled through many hybrid voices.

Or is he? As you can see throughout this issue (perhaps most clearly in Brian Henry's Notes), Šalamun is deeply involved in the minutiae of his translations. And to many readers of English, the Šalamunian voice is remarkably consistent across translations. Is he somehow constructing, with the help of these deeply diverse American poets, a singular Anglophone voice?

In this issue we have gathered the poets who are involved in creating the phenomenon that is Tomaž Šalamun in America. We present them in their distinctiveness and in conversation with the translation process that ties them together. Of the eleven poets (so far) who have co-translated Šalamun's work into English, seven appear in this special issue of Transom to share their poems and their thoughts on Šalamun, translation, and poetry.

Within the Notes sections, you will find links to sample translations by each contributor, along with our usual brief conversations with the poets. In addition, we have a special feature: a brief interview about Šalamun with Slovenian poet, translator, and critic Miklavž Komelj. Given this issue's obsession with the powerful and idiosyncratic voices that mediate Anglophone access to Šalamun's work, we felt that offering the insights of a brilliant critic of his poems in their original Slovene would be of particular value. Komelj's thoughts come to us in English through the work of translator Rawley Grau. We also include excerpts from Grau's translation of a much longer essay by Komelj, "On the Poetic Methods of Tomaž Šalamun's Recent Poetry," which appeared as the afterward to Šalamun's Sinji stolp (The Blue Tower) in 2007.

We hope that this issue can serve several functions, including:
1. To shine some light and praise on the artists who, in addition to writing their own excellent poems, have pursued the normally thankless task of helping bring another poet's work into English.
2. To help readers of Šalamun's work see and appreciate the perspectives, aesthetics, and styles of these not-so-silent partners in Šalamun's Anglophone oeuvre.
3. To begin a conversation, which we hope to continue, about the role of translation in contemporary American poetry.

The Editors

Miklavž Komelj (issue 3), born in 1973, is a Slovene poet, essayist, and art historian, who lives in Ljubljana. He received a doctoral degree in art history from the University of Ljubljana in 2002 with the dissertation “The Meanings of Nature in Tuscan Painting in the First Half of the 14th Century.” He has published seven books of poetry, a collection of essays entitled The Necessity of Poetry (Nujnost poezije, 2010), and a study of the art of the Yugoslav partisans in World War II, How Should We Think about Partisan Art? (Kako misliti partizansko umetnost?, 2009). He has also published Slovene translations of works by Fernando Pessoa (2003, 2007), Pier Paolo Pasolini (2005, 2007), and César Vallejo (2011).

Transom:
We recently had the pleasure of reading Rawley Grau's translation of your essay, "On the Poetic Methods of Tomaž Šalamun's Recent Poetry," which appeared as the afterward to Šalamun's Sinji stolp (The Blue Tower, 2007). Discussing his reception in Slovenia, you suggest:

If Šalamun's earliest poems were felt immediately as a genuine earthquake in the history of Slovene poetry, this was in large measure due to a certain time lag in Slovene culture, which in its inertia had not yet come to terms with the modernist breakthrough in art. Poems that, structurally, were hardly radical in the overall European context of the time struck Slovene culture as nothing less than revolutionary—which was particularly curious given the fact that, while Šalamun's work was seen as an assault on tradition, he was the one who brought into Slovene poetry elements of the global cultural tradition that had previously been impermissible.

You further assert that, "In today's Slovene culture, however, Šalamun's new poetic language, as it attempts to inhabit spaces that have always been silent, is received, or not received, as a kind of inertia. In Slovenia his books appear, one after the other, almost without notice."

To what do you attribute this shift in how the Slovenian poetry-reading community has received Salalmun's work?

Komelj:
I've noticed a bizarre phenomenon in the reception of Šalamun's poetry in Slovenia: it often happens that people who, in a certain period, had been so excited about Šalamun that they thought of him almost as a kind of poetic god later become, as it were, allergic to him and start publicly attacking him. I think that here we are seeing a lot of personal issues: some people madly suction on to Šalamun's energy and project all sorts of their own expectations onto him—and then just as madly fall into the opposite extreme. And the poetry they once idolized becomes for them virtually an object of contempt.

Another thing is that today what is published in Slovenia under the label “poetry” is dominated by boring descriptions of everyday life in an everyday language. Šalamun’s nondescriptive use of language is alien to people who write in this way.

But my stance toward Šalamun’s recent poetry, in the essay you cite, is in no way simply apologetic; in fact, I constantly ask the question: how much do Šalamun’s current poetic methods really change the linguistic reality and how much are they merely an ecstatic, if not, indeed, hedonistic, surrender to its sensual splendor? The answer to this question, however, cannot lie in some predetermined position with regard to these methods; instead, one must analyze actual poems. In the essay, which is fairly critical, I tried to offer some basic ideas about how to do such analyses. Certainly, the duality between, on one side, the attempt to bring a language that, beyond the censorship of “sane reason,” is attentive to the unconscious flow of free associations into spaces that up to now have always been silent and, on the other, inertia—certainly, this duality is not only a matter of reception but also touches on a problem that some of the surrealists were aware of (among the Yugoslav surrealists, Djordje Kostić accentuated it very sharply when discussing his own poetic work): namely, the very greatest spontaneity, which tries to be as free as possible, can in fact appear to be inert, to be trapped in schemes and repetitions. And here, certainly, there is a trap. But what I like so much about Šalamun is precisely the fact that he is not afraid of anything that happens in his poetry. Even thirty years ago, for instance, when he was asked in an interview if he wasn’t afraid that he might end up going in circles, he calmly responded by saying, “What’s wrong with going in circles? The spoon that stirs in the sugar goes in circles in the cup, the sun goes in circles, etc.” Serge Daney once wrote about Fassbinder that he had earned the right to be uneven, the ability to miss the target in a given film without endangering his image. I’m not comparing Šalamun to Fassbinder, but I can say that I sincerely admire the way Šalamun has won himself the right to write a poem or a book that misses the mark without it in any way reducing his true significance. And I also think that this is exactly what those envious, small-hearted people in Slovenia find it hardest to accept about him.

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I should confess that I usually read Šalamun's books after a few years' delay. Certain books of his, which meant nothing to me when they first came out, I only really discovered later. Generally, when I read poetry, I'm not concerned with trying to assess it one way or another; what seems far more important to me is how much the impulses in the poetry I'm reading connect with what I myself am trying to do in my own writing of poetry—and here I should say that the critical engagement I had with Šalamun's recent poetry when I was writing the afterword to The Blue Tower was extremely important for me: I think that this engagement gave me several important impulses when I was writing the poems in my book The Blue Dress, which I consider to be the most important of all the books I have published to date. In general, I can say that in the history of my poetic efforts, Šalamun's poetry has been of tremendous help to me at certain critical moments, especially in the nineties, so I think of Šalamun as one of the poets to whom I feel much gratitude.

There are several conditions I've experienced which, of all the poetry I know, I have found expressed in words only in Šalamun, and some were so fragile that, even after a second reading of the same poems, I never found them again in these poems.

Otherwise, as regards Šalamun's influence on Slovenian poetry, I would like to mention the following: the true effect of Šalamun's poetry is more important in places where we don't see it immediately than where we can point our finger at it. If a Slovenian poet imitatively adopts a "Šalamunic" manner of writing, in most cases this can only mean his writing is hopelessly bad. But a true correspondence with Šalamun's poetry has always happened entirely somewhere else—I have just been editing the literary remains of Jure Detela and there I discovered how important Šalamun's poetry was in the formation of this poet, who in his poetic methods is completely different from Šalamun. Jure Detela was a poet of true genius, who is still to be discovered in America.

Transom:
You note that “Šalamun’s poetry, which when read in the original Slovene seems to rely on wholly unpredictable linguistic means for its effect, has in fact achieved its greatest impact internationally, through translation.” To what do you attribute Šalamun's international success? As an accomplished translator yourself, do you see anything about Šalamun’s work that particularly lends itself to translation? What do you think of his practice of co-translating with many different contemporary poets?

Komelj:
You’ve asked me a difficult question. I have never done any research on the reasons behind Šalamun’s “international success”; and then there is the question of what can be called “success” with regard to poetry. I think that the very concept of “success” carries with it something alien to poetry; I have never thought about poetry in connection with the category “success.” I do think, however, that Šalamun’s poetry simply calls out for translations even in its conceptual world—this poetry continually happens in different cultures and on different continents simultaneously—and I am sure that many segments of this poetry are much easier to recognize and receive in a number of other cultural contexts than in the Slovenian one. This is true also in relation to tradition. To take an example selected entirely at random, I think that Šalamun’s poem for the mother of Gérard de Nerval (from the book Soy realidad) can be received by more readers in cultures other than the Slovenian, simply because there are extremely few people in Slovenia who have ever read anything written by Nerval. And I am not even talking about the fact that at least some of Šalamun’s books actually arose in a context that was at least as much American as Slovenian; the poetry Šalamun wrote in the early seventies arose as part of what was happening at the time on the most radical American scene. Bob Perelman, as far as I can tell, came into the consciousness of Slovenians as a poet only with the translation of Fredric Jameson’s book Postmodernism in 1992; before then, for Slovenians, he was primarily a figure from Šalamun’s poetry.

As for the practice of co-translating, I don't have any basic opinion about it. I think everything depends on the actual people who are collaborating, on the kind of mutual understanding that the two people who co-translate a certain text are capable of establishing.

Transom:
You have characterized Salamun's poetic language as centering on an interplay between energy and flatness – between the spectacular and the opaque. We are thinking particularly of these two passages from your essay:

Šalamun's inventiveness with language has, indeed, never been more dynamic than in his most recent books. But in this dynamism there is also a monotone quality, which the poet makes no attempt to hide. It is as if this ecstasy resulted from spinning endlessly in a circle, like the whirling dervishes —a religious order, incidentally, that was founded by the mystic Rumi, one of Šalamun's favorite poets....It seems that the intensity of Šalamun's language lies precisely in the endless insistence of its pulsation.
...
In Šalamun's poetry, the following is always important: the suggestiveness of his language lures the reader into an intense identification with it, which can suck him in with an extraordinary force—Šalamun has said that language is the most dangerous drug. But almost always, there is a point at which identification becomes impossible, which keeps the reader at bay and compels him to reflection. What is more, something that is impossible to identify with may emerge out of the very intensity of the identification.

You find poetic richness in the moments when Šalamun loses the reader and when the energy of his inventiveness flattens into monotone – which tend to be the moments in Šalamun's poems that can frustrate new readers. What position can those readers take to find the richness, the intensity you find in these more difficult aspects of Šalamun's poems?

Komelj:
I have no particular advice to give to readers, but I do think that richness and intensity can exist simply in recognizing unreadability as an irreducible component of reading per se.

Miklavž Komelj's responses were translated from the Slovenian by Rawley Grau.

Tomaž Šalamun (issue 3, issue 10) (1941–2014) was born in Zagreb to Slovenian parents and grew up in the port city of Koper, near Trieste. In his lifetime, he published 48 original books of poetry and his work has been translated into nearly 30 languages. His most recent book in English is Justice (Black Ocean Press, 2016).

Transom:
You are one of very few non-American poets who regularly appear in print in America. Do you think there’s something distinctly American about your work? Something distinctly Šalamunian about America?

Šalamun:
I don't know. I visited the US for the first time when I was 28 (first as a conceptual artist when I was part of Information Show in MOMA), but I was already formed as a poet, after my two samizdats and one officially published book, mostly influenced by French (Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Cendrars, Desnos), Slovenian (Kosovel, Zajc), Russian (Chlebnikov. Mandelstam) Serbian (Popa) and Polish (Milosz, Rimkiewicz). Of course I also knew Whitman, Eliot and Pound, but what blew my mind, exploded me and changed my chemistry in Iowa in 1971 was Ashbery's Three Poems. My idols and my friends then were Anselm Hollo and Bob Perelman. We had a lot in common. As I escaped from too strong French philosophers (Derrida, Barthes, Kristeva, Sollers -- I was an avid reader of Tel Quel), these were authors who were just starting to influence the US. If I weren't formed before, and also writing something similar to language poetry,I would have been swallowed by the strong American poetry scene, the strongest in the world then and now. Two years of America, the freedom to write, and a few drives from coast to coast were enough to get some America under my skin.

Transom:
We can’t think of a single other living poet who has had so many different translators – and certainly not so many translators who are themselves poets. Why do you work with so many poet-translators? What are some of the benefits and challenges of this method, particularly given that most of your translators are not fluent in Slovene?

Šalamun:
It comes from my mania and provincialism. Slovenians at that time didn't have anybody (except the architect Jozef Plecnik) known in the world. I didn't want to feel like an orphan among the European friends of my parents. So I aggresively begged everybody to translate me.

To be in the hands of a good poet is more important then to be translated by somebody who just knows the language. Well, I was extremely lucky also with my two translators who know Slovenian: Michael Biggins and Sonja Kravanja.

Transom:
What qualities make a good translator of your poetry?

Šalamun:
Openness, passion and love.

Transom:
Your poems have always been overrun with animals, and this selection is no exception: rabbits, rats, mice, elephants, carps, spiders, boars, otters, cats, ladybugs, horses, crocodiles, dogs, and cattle all get named in these eight short poems. “The beastmaster is greasy,” you say in “In Lisbon” – are you the beastmaster? Are you the zoo? Or are you the wilds?

Šalamun:
I too was shocked to see so many animals in these poems. Strange. I'm more the beast than the zoo director, I would say. Many beasts are taking me apart. Still now. I'm still snowing journals with my poems in spite of knowing that I'm damaging my reputation.

Evening, Among Muses

Mouse! My grandchild, my suitor!
At sunset I see your two white little
eyes and in them
two baskets of red flowers.
Who will drink wine of pressed
cyclamens! Aren't you afraid, Father, you will
ruin the shape of the basket and the juice
of your eyes will spread?
Mouse! My grandchild, my suitor!
Your belly is the skin of the dead rabbit,
crucified above the Parthenon.
Or above brothers, the World Trade Center,
because rain falls to earth always from
below. From the sea.
And my grandchild whom I beat with my
racquet so he falls in even harder spurt
toward the Statue of Liberty,
my suitor dies in the air.
His eyes melt
and unbolt the door for the scent's
free way to heaven.

[Translated from the Slovenian by Michael Thomas Taren and the author]

The Aztec

Lilies are mystery,
little wild boar!
With the skull which will break
like a skull of the otter. And like
the sun's scissors tiring my flowers.
Like this rumbling of the engine which
goes as long as it goes. Why are you
born into the red air, fluid!

The birth is the collapse of a bridge.
The last black cat's body hair falls.
And my palate, teeth and the tongue,
Komna, where I was skiing,
are all registered for death.

Who repeats the damp treacherous (revisions)
seed, not more than
cramps of the blackest karmas.
White otter, look!
Clouds decompose themselves in front of your eyes (ruin)
but they don't tear apart the fairytale.

What should the rabbit's ear do with my saliva!
I won't console him, even if screaming:
No me muerdas!
Muerde me!

[Translated from the Slovenian by Michael Thomas Taren and the author]

Duomo

When they gave orders to make me pants for the first
communion they cut them short. I went to the
confirmation as a small scout too. On the way I kept
killing rats with my keys. I was afraid they would eat my

bike. The door was adorned with flowers. But the watch
deliberately didn't work. They gave us many fancy
cakes and poured the wine on us. So that the breath
wouldn't evaporate and escape. There was a gentleman

with a wooden leg creeping in the church. He didn't
look much. When he threw his wooden leg in the
fountain, the foamsprinkled also on those who had

brought oranges. Wafer breads are flat. Without
the earth the light wouldn't exist and steaks would be
flat already on the animals who still make baa-aa-h.

[Translated from the Slovenian by Michael Thomas Taren and the author]

By the Dead One

When comes the time rabbits will be soft
like little children hands burnt in concentration camps!

When comes the time suffering will boil
and spill like aura!

When comes the times I will be able to hang on water
and drink it, drink it!

When comes the times of punishment!

When comes the time the mill wheel
will exchange my bonds with dust of granite!

When comes the time my palm will be God!

When comes the time my breasts will bleed
so taller palm trees, pine trees will grow, you!

When will my soul look itself into its face!

[Translated from the Slovenian by Michael Thomas Taren and the author]

In Lisbon Hydrants Vomit

The evening is calm. Elephants
sway in their own nest.

Little herbs with caps give light
to the power struggle.

The gliders are all gray.
Carps wave them.

Throw, throw yourself on the sycamore
roof. First we traveled

on the wagon top in Mexico.
The beastmaster is greasy,

he saves money. Sophie! Offer me coffee!
With the T-shirt, tight. Yes.

Even a liter of water tells more. Not to
Mention the white mottled purim.

[Translated from the Slovenian by Michael Thomas Taren and the author]

Roofer, Roofer, Will You Subsist?

On the boulevards, on the trees,
in the warm black cellars of rime,
there is the face on the little plate,
on the face the grapes, a millboard.

People shift from the roofs
of houses and discover
corridors. I buy Le Monde
on the corner of la rue des armes.

The rime curved my street,
it crumpled it and swallowed. It
cannot reach it. Although I know she'll
soon be back, maybe la rue des armes

does not exist. But this will not be in my
lungs. In the lungs the mana is
consumed by fire. There the decision
is made if we will boil the world,

what we'll protect, what we will own.
How to toss dustbins from the car
and to sail in the rum. And on wings,
on wings, people settlers! Don't stomp

the roofs of houses. To want, to
want French francks in the slot. To
wish, to wish to drink ones own head
in la rue Delambre. To kill oneself!

[Translated from the Slovenian by Michael Thomas Taren and the author]

Russians

Kind lobes as punched
cups. It gurgles, gurgles,

rain. On the Rhine bank I rolled rock
with blue copper. I lunched

with Rejn’s ex wife. She cried.
Harsh is my hill, my

eye is bloodshot. My hair was
plucked by spiders. While I

sneeze, grottos open. Wild
game airs inside. My juice

is all in white. I’m all in white.
I cry and take small

steps, anthems roar below the
black soil. And you?

[Translated from the Slovenian by Michael Thomas Taren and the author]

The rolling, trees glue debauchery
the dead Christ, a cavalry, white nun’s handkerchiefs
a wrinkled canvas, he looks vigorous and barefoot
splendid and killed, handsome with dark brown soles
on the right the typical iconographic logs, a little cat
Tobias with a hump on his apex, with his hand on the chest of logos’ march
ladybugs carry messages, a gentlewoman plays chess
the meeting point of poachers
Tyssen with Giovanna Tornabuoni
we fix the frame with a screw, with threads
with nickeled pulley bought in hardware store
you’ll be buried beneath, heated cavalry
torn down by colonnades with profiles
algae, scents, Moses in the arms with a model of poison
food and indifference of lucidity
two young fiancés with a horse and a mirror
dry yellowish corpse, blue millimeter paper
what do you sing? a lullaby? a meditation in the chasuble?
palm trees? birds above the sea and crocodiles?
how the door develops?

how does Don Fernando Nino de Guevara sleep?
the calendar, the calendar, towers, a wet grass
the smelly flesh and the treatise about sanctity of the family
papal nuncios, a tall willow tree, the blood softly running away
the celebration, the bread on viola da gamba
in the antechamber the dog
in the fine woven basket little spoons lacquered with faith
the rolling, the passion of cattle, of skaters, seducing the rhythm
having in the hand pornography and trembling
flowers, plankton, Christmas cribs and colored rocks
this gives us the power to breathe, this gives the power to sense the pen
let us peel little Flemish girls with sharp scent

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Michael Thomas Taren (issue 3) exists.

Transom:
How did you come to translate Šalamun’s work?

Taren:
Tomaž was a visiting professor at my school, The University of Pittsburgh, in 2006 when I was still an undergrad. I took his class. He'd already been working with another poet, also his student, Thomas Kane. It all unfurled from there. It has been Tomaz's ambition always to fold the latest generations into the translation of his still growing oeuvre. The thing of main importance is that we began to trust each other's instincts and judgments. So I came to co-translating his work because we began to trust one another. Now, as I approach my third decade, I expect anytime to be sent to sea on a burning raft. I equate this to the apotheosis that marriage is.

Transom:
What relationships do you see between Šalamun’s work and your own?

Taren:
A tendency to disguise, via squalls of passion, impotence and stupidity, our deeply bred sense of entitlement to liberty, gratitude, disdain and love.

Transom:
The voice of this poem pushes toward honesty through wild abandon, but the coda collapses that energy into a ridiculously measured bit of self-awareness. How do you find where to land when balancing the explosive and cohesive forces in your poems?

Taren:
As I become fatigued, the poem acquires cohesion. "Wild abandon" but oppositely founded. The fatigue doesn't express from wildness, it expresses from the attempt to abandon wildness, on the scale of letters. This poem is more like a successful abortion, that is, the foetus (chaos, failure) is successfully dead, no matter how many parts now exist to prove what was its now bygone wholeness and mechanical splendor. Also, because the end is much more uncomfortable than the beginning.

Sample Translations:
Chapbook: *Curtis Harnack Wrapped Me in a Shawl*
Typo
Drunken Boat

September 14 2011

what is completed, to be complete
he tried to pull it out only it tore
the skin more than he thought it might step forward,
look, turn head away, he is not looking at you
turn head away, turn head, walk forward, he is not looking
turn head he is not looking, keep head here
while he is not looking must turn head away,
the limbs in front, the legs parted, one by the other,
away from sight, taken from sight,
I love you I love you too You look nice tonight
so do you, you look great, you look great,
so there is no help, and what he says
all this is to lull into the step taken forward
this could be termed existence, a negative
cross, and it offends me
it offends him, the positive traits are woven in
with mere passivity. To tear him apart
to put a knife in him again again and feel
your teeth chewing his relation to himself
you dripped wax over his scrotum sack
which you then pierced with a needle
after you fucked you living still
body still wanted more but could barely
move under the growing chunks of
lethargic aching systems. You too look nice
you look this could all be you I desecrate his
clothing as his neck drains inside his throat
and across his open shirt chest visible
he zips his pants and gets up and kisses me
on my mouth that is nether such the sufferer
just when it seems he is more I leave it

he leaves me and by seeming the same as me
while I was sucking sperm out of your cock
he was dissolving somewhere in I have
spoken, go on, he will, the inner
while he was being dissolved I was
sitting on your face as it passes into
the past, yes, the present, you mean the gilded
hall, I take my leave of you, as I
left he grabbed my ankle tripping me
I could see his pierced nipple is all
that a woman has you living, he says, the blood
was a weird kind of blood on the shirt that
got stabbed through but more than that did it dissolve
it gobbing on the rim so he cleaned it
I've always thought to think of it I would not
he said not saying would you like to he ran
with the eye slightly loose tripped and fell
on with me fate a rusted concrete pile
his pants came off flare diffused when I dragged
him and hid him and better hid him
the effect of his insides coursing out of his
inside his body I saw all things in his
beautiful shin bone so much more than thou
he was the same as I beat him across the shins
and crotch and remembered the first time
I tasted sperm zipped up pants coming to life
he looked the same, very handsome, his face
brightening in the declining non addition
rather than speak here we went toward
the signal, I conducted him with thy aid
they help so inner to the
to the dale where thy help loosed and confounded
and the joining of composures permanently

make forever a forever most succinct, long
efficient, german, he was this way, my faithful
love unware that I source your end
I needed to pee so I took a pee before burying
him and then giving up on burying him
as naught he said to me but I am a youth
and here my wreath as naught else he said to me
but I said to him he took my clothes off
and off but that it is to its season and always is
he looked as alive as he did dead and nothing
that changed so much nothing that changed

I cannot give you pleasure because I am dissatisfied with my body

Christopher Merrill (issue 3, issue 11) has published six collections of poetry, including Watch Fire, for which he received the Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets; many edited volumes and translations; and six books of nonfiction, among them *Only the Nails Remain: Scenes from the Balkan Wars; Things of the Hidden God: Journey to the Holy Mountain; The Tree of the Doves: Ceremony, Expedition, War; and Self-Portrait with Dogwood.* His writings have been translated into nearly forty languages; his journalism appears widely; his honors include a Chevalier from the French government in the Order of Arts and Letters. As director of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, Merrill has conducted cultural diplomacy missions to more than fifty countries. He serves on the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO, and in April 2012 President Obama appointed him to the National Council on the Humanities. Author photo (c) Ram Devineni.

Transom:
How did you come to translate Šalamun’s work?

Merrill:
I met Tomaž in Ljubljana in the summer of 1992, and during a long lunch we decided that one day we would work together on his poems. Thus began a long and fruitful association, where we met in various places to work on his poems, using literal translations into English and French as the starting points for what we would make together, with the help of several dictionaries and a lot of laughter.

Transom:
What relationships do you see between Šalamun’s work and your own?

Merrill:
Certainly Tomaž encouraged me to write with greater freedom. But more to the point: his single-minded devotion to poetry, the way that he seems to sniff in the very air that he breathes the beginning of a new line, convinced me that the Muse demands from her servants everything that we have to give. His work, his presence, his vision: water from a mountain spring. I drink deep.

Transom:
Many of your new poems take the reader on a journey through a series of unsettling landscapes. Indeed, we seem to enter each poem precisely at the moment when the ordinary suddenly becomes bizarre. Take these lines from "Newly Minted": "She wanted to get out of the car. But when she told him to pull over to the side of the road he gunned the engine..." What possibilities does physical disorientation offer your poetry?

Merrill:
I have traveled relentlessly for more than twenty years, first as a journalist and now in my position as the director of the International Writing program, and no doubt my memory and imagination have been shaped by the strangeness of some of my journeys--which, I suppose, is a metaphor for what I take to be the mystery of human existence: a mystery that no one embodies more fully in their poems than Tomaž Šalamun.

Sample Translations:
from *The Book for My Brother* (via Poetry Daily)
Merrill's introduction to Šalamun's *The Four Questions of Melancholy*

Alphabet
for Ron Carlson

A ceramic dish lined with the teeth of the first emperor
Bears an inscription—seven unrecognizable
Characters describing, perhaps, his abrupt
Descent into madness, his bold
Experiment designed to exorcise the demons
Fattening themselves on the produce of the peasants—their cattle,
Grain, and spirits distilled from walnuts and figs.
Hear me out! he liked to say.
I sentence you to fifty lashes and then a minute of laughter.
Joke writers held an honored place in his court.
Kleptomaniacs, too, especially those with a taste for silk
Lingerie. He demanded half of their loot—
Maroon brassieres and panties were his favorites—
Nor would he make them wear what he would never wear.
Ordinary criminals, though, received harsh
Punishment—amputation, impalement, drawing and
Quartering. And he had no mercy for illiterates.
Readings were thus required at every funeral,
State dinner, and carnival, not to mention wrestling matches.
There was no escaping his lettered gaze, which was painted on every building.
Under his rule, books were the safest currency
Valued according to omens read by the fortune-telling
Women assigned to the basement of the library.
X-rays of his tomb reveal his commitment to his father's vision—
Yellow walls covered with texts no one has deciphered,
Zeroes arranged around his grave, like candles.

———————

A high official from the court was assigned to lead our tour of the underworld, which provoked more speculation about the sovereign's health. Basta! muttered the guides idled by an edict they did not pretend to understand. Ciao bella, whispered the palace guard to all the women in our entourage. Dusk came on before we could decide whether to stay or go, and so we stood at loose ends in the gathering darkness, shivering in the wind. Enter at your own risk, said the official, twisting the waxed tips of his mustache like candlewicks, pointing at the island in the middle of the lake from which rose the castle ruins. Fanning out across the beach, like a militia recruited from the mountains, we climbed uncertainly into the boats and rowed across the water. Gone was our vaunted sense of moderation, the map that we had followed in our pursuit of happiness; for no sooner had we made landfall than we sprinted to a cave near the ruins, in which we found a marble staircase descending into the earth. Halfway down, we stopped on the slick steps to get our bearings, and from inside the wall we heard a steady tapping, which led us to question, again, the nature of our mission—its secret provenance, its murky goals, the way it was portrayed to the town criers. Inevitably someone claimed to see a ghost, which on closer inspection turned out to be a stalactite. Jesus Christ, the official said under his breath—a diplomatic lapse that caught us by surprise, though we said nothing. Khans might order caravans across the desert before we let on that anything was amiss. Long ago, on a mission to the ungovernable border region, we had learned a lesson about the virtue of silence, having misinterpreted a chieftain's slip of the tongue as the final word on the peace process—which led to even more fighting. Make no mistake: we were not tempted to go to war, despite our opponents' scurrilous allegations on the eve of our departure. Nor would we betray our ideals to appease the enemy. Our orders were clear: to avoid compromising situations—which underscored the ambivalence we felt on our dark descent. Pity the note-takers assigned to our strategy session the night before, the inconclusiveness of which had prompted the decision to spare no expense in our last attempt to salvage the mission. Queer as it may sound, we still believed the empire would never end. Resurrection was the theme, after all, and regardless of what befell us we intended to act as if nothing had changed upon our return.

Summary justice would continue; also athletic contests and dance performances. Take heart, we told our security detail when we reached the waterfall at the bottom of the cave. Useless to cover our ears—the noise was deafening—or plot an escape. Victory was not an option, at least not in the short run. Where to go? Xenophobia had been our ministering angel for so long that we could not imagine another way to spell our fate. You cannot breathe a word of this to anyone. Zones of indifference were what we hoped to create—and we might yet succeed.

The Concert

The taxi driver seethed, but what to do? He needed the fare. Wayne Newton in a blue-frilled shirt was slumped in the passenger seat, Salman Rushdie pressed his face against the window, and I kept telling my sidekick that no one would believe our luck. The driver pulled his baseball cap down over his eyes, crossing a bridge closed for repairs to avoid the checkpoints on our way out of the city. Wayne's seizure began on a country road lined with birches draped in yellow leaves, and didn't end until Salman climbed into the front seat to cradle his head. The driver sped toward the mountains, muttering, this shall be a sign for you; the singer, nestled against the novelist's chest, crooned in reply, that I will visit you for evil. Deep in the tunnel the driver stopped to let us out at the entrance to the mine shaft, and we descended six stories to an underground stage set up for a concert to benefit the victims of the earthquake. Wayne flashed his badge at the guards, who waved us past a gaggle of reporters waiting for the president. No one will ever believe this, I said again, though by now my sidekick was nowhere to be seen.

The Orchard

They waited in the orchard for the order to advance on the farm house from which the rebels had long since fled. No one knew what had become of the informant whose tip about a meeting of the insurgency's leadership had led the soldiers to cordon off a village that did not appear on any map. He was a vintner recruited after the invasion, skilled at the art of adaptation, and if he compared intelligence gathering to harvesting his neighbor's grapes, a pleasant diversion for an old man, he also told his paymasters that fermentation carried risks—a warning they dismissed as drunken talk. The wind died, swallows dipped and soared around the trees, and in the noonday heat the soldiers drowsed or dreamed of women they would have on their next leave. The new lieutenant was revising his plans for graduate school, when a peach landed on his backpack. He jumped to his feet, folded and unfolded his map, ordered his men to look sharp. A sniper took up his position on the ridge. What had the vintner said? Ripeness is all.

Genesis

Don’t stop, she said as he poured from the watering can the keys to houses she had never visited, drawers she could not unlock, cars reserved for others. Then coins from countries that appeared on none of her itineraries—Ukraine and Indonesia and Iran, not to mention Argentina and Brazil. And hoop earrings she would not be caught dead in, glass beads from a necklace worn by someone else, a silver brooch that made her heart ache. Don’t stop, she said when there was nothing left—and so he filled the can with water to sprinkle over the objects spread like seeds on the dining room table. One by one they sprouted into new lines of argument, and as they grew she raised her hands above her head, crying, Don’t stop.

Newly Minted

They had assembled in the atrium for the viewing of the coins—a retired heart surgeon, a lawyer assigned to monitor export licenses, a banker twice accused of fraud. Each had his eye on a ruble minted for a count who had refused the call to become tsar; each thought he had a failsafe means of extracting it from the display case set up for a delegation of mining engineers from the Urals: first, disarm the guard checking names at the door, then distract the docent responsible for the kopeks and ingots commemorating rulers and victories at sea and on land, and then replace the coin with a replica made by a counterfeiter amazed to receive the same commission three times in a week. He kept the mold for luck. The thieves were also superstitious: they hoped the rules of engagement had changed since the discovery of the collection hidden by the Grand Duke. (He was shot by a firing squad.) The engineers headed for the buffet.

———————

The captions of the silent film were in translation; and since none of the original prints remained (destroyed in a fire, hidden during the uprising, or stolen after the war: no one knew what had become of them), they hired deaf students to read the lips of the men fighting over a woman who would die young. What they learned was that the gap between the actors' words and gestures could not be bridged; also that the translator had a sense of humor, editing the dialogue to suit his view that romantic love posed a threat to mankind. The train's late, said one man. I can hear its whistle, said the other. There's no train, is there? said the woman—and the men raised their fists. Fidelity to the spirit of the original acquired new meaning for the students translating into signs jokes that had lost their sting. But they persisted, and soon they could anticipate the translator's inventions. Which is to say: they could speak his language. All aboard!

———————

If hospitality determines the outcome of the campaign to save our way of life, then we will surely lose. There was no reason to define the occupation in the same terms that we used for The Book of Hours. And when the accuracy of the gauges was questioned it was foolish to replace them with tiles retrieved from the bottom of the sea. Anything's possible! This was how we described the new dispensation. But we should have known better than to seal the drums with pitch before the trumpeters and zither players had learned their parts. For there was no turning back once the music started. A phalanx of policemen marched toward the square, where the crowd gathering by the fountain chanted the name of a prophet whose warnings had not been heeded; the snipers on the roofs of the surrounding buildings checked their sights; from a loudspeaker came the refrain of a popular song from the revolution: Anything at all!

———————

She wanted to get out of the car. But when she told him to pull over to the side of the road he gunned the engine, tightening his grip on the steering wheel until his knuckles whitened. She could see the drawbridge rising above the canal, and as his features hardened she wondered what it was that she had ever seen in him. The gate was down, red lights flashed, bells rang. The abyss opened before them: blue sky, blue water, and a caravel built in the style of the ships used by the early explorers to sail to the New World. Please, she said in a soothing voice, knowing that if she pleaded he would never stop. An elderly couple leaned against the guardrail, watching the boat glide under the bridge, toward the bay, tapping their feet, as if listening to music. Look, she said, touching his sleeve. Nor was she surprised when he lifted his foot off the accelerator and coasted toward the gate, which would rise soon. They could be singing our song.

———————

Why have a dog and bark yourself? the diplomat asked the arms control negotiators. And when no one answered he knew the treaty was doomed. A fortune-teller swept into the conference room, read the minutes from the last meeting, and scribbled something on the palm of her hand. The future, she declared—and then abruptly left. Both teams of negotiators began to argue among themselves, their voices rising, the note-takers writing as fast as they could. Kiss the hand you cannot bite, the diplomat whispered to his aide, then asked for a moment of silence, which seemed to go on and on, testing the resolve of the note-takers and the imagination of his aide, a man who would never distinguish himself; when the diplomat finally clapped his hands, the negotiators gathered up their papers and filed out of the room, refusing to meet his eye. And when the sirens blared all the dogs in the neighborhood howled.

Matthew Rohrer (issue 3) is the author of 7 books of poems, most recently Destroyer and Preserver, published by Wave Books. One of his tattoos has been featured in two different books of literary tattoos. He lives in Brooklyn.

Transom:
How did you come to translate Šalamun’s work?

Rohrer:
I met Šalamun in the 90s and we became friends and he asked me if I would look at some of his poems for him, to sort of help him clean them up. Let's be clear that that is all I can do for his poems -- clean them up for American publication. He showed me a bunch and I did a lot of work on them and Rebecca Wolff and I published one or two of them (I can't remember) in our inaugural issue of Fence, and he read those translations for the Fence reading at the Public Theater. That was thrilling for me, of course, not only to hear him read but to hear him read my translations. We did several more which were published in various places -- places that wouldn't ever publish me otherwise. Šalamun likes to have many voices translate his work and I think that's great -- his first book here, the Ecco Selected, had at least 5 different translators if not more, and I think that is a good thing. I was only a very small part of what has become Šalamun In English, and I like it that way. I've always liked the Paul Auster French anthology for that reason -- that he included several different translator's voices for each French poet.

Transom:
What relationships do you see between Šalamun’s work and your own?

Rohrer:
Šalamun's poetry was very simply extremely influential for me. I've said this stuff a million times, but basically his amazing combination of European seriousness and historical gravitas mixed with a New York School influenced freedom was a revelation to me at the time, and something I tried and try to work at in my own poems.

Transom:
Your new poems gather strength from the juxtaposition of seemingly disparate syntactical units. Take the strangely dissonant closing lines from “Volkswagen Rabbit:” “I drove you to your car./Your curly hair in the late/afternoon on the prairie./And then you went/to Belgium and died.” Taken together, these lines suggest an elegy, but the reader senses a whole history of grief submerged in the silences between lines. What is the relationship between the spoken and the unspoken in your poetry?

Rohrer:
I definitely always want to take out rather than put in. I want to say as little as possible while suggesting as much as possible. Sometimes that fails. Sometimes people aren't right there with you, and they're not getting all that you think you are suggesting. I'm extremely interested in the way that Basho, Issa, Buson, etc. are able to say so much with so little. I think the secret is in WHAT is spoken and how the right spoken thing can carry along with it, secretly, under wraps, the important unspoken things. But there's a lot of failure.

Sample Translations:
Agni
"The Sword" in *There's the Hand and There's the Arid Chair*

Volkswagen Rabbit

Kelly you were so tall!
You had long legs
and you did a good job
shaving them. Something
incredibly complicated was going on
in America 1987.
I drove you to your car.
Your curly hair in the late
afternoon on the prairie.
And then you went
to Belgium and died.

Solstice

It stays and stays
the longest day
Christians stand around
the Laundromat
talking about the Jews
annoying the city
the white in the sky caresses them
the afternoon licks itself
it raises little goose bumps
like an odalisque
a yoga mat of clover
in the park an accent
that sweeps away
the fog 3:50 PM a storm
can tell you everything
about the movies
afterwards a calm
a silence
trees and plants
are softly throbbing
it’s how they breathe

Now That Shirt Is Bittersweet

Now that shirt is bittersweet
the president sweeps the globe
there’s a chill
after days of terrible heat
“whatever you say dear” my wife
is washing the dishes
a fantasy baseball game
with my son drags on
to extra innings in Paris
the lights go out
explosion!
the radio DJ gasps and dies
the haunted windows
spread their wings
the stones in the courtyard
go dark in the rain

There Is a Flower

There is a flower
that only grows
in the forest canopy
someone said its name
I wasn’t listening
we only know about it
because it falls
on us as we walk
a faint path
through the pines
and a lower canopy
of nettles
like a burst of dawn
they lie on the path
too fine of strange colors
to belong here
this must be
why the butterflies
spend so much time
up high
get higher

Peter Richards (issue 3) is the author of *Oubliette* (Wave Books 2001), *Nude Siren* (Wave Books 2003), and *Helsinki* (Action Books 2011).

Transom:
How did you come to translate Šalamun's work?

Richards:
I think it was in the spring of 1999 when Brian Henry invited me along with six other poets to a restaurant in New York where it was thought Šalamun would appear. He did appear and after dinner the group of us went for a stroll together. I remember all this fierce competitive smoking, the odd scarf, and lots of shy laughter for those were the days.

Transom:
What relationships do you see between Šalamun's work and your own?

Richards:
After I read my first Šalamun poem I began to see words as physical things. Things that can sometimes happen to each other and so I try to be alert to that.

Transom:
In your poems, much like in Šalamun's, anything can become divine, and anything demonic – as in full of suffering. Is there a specific cosmology at play in your work? When all visions are more or less terrifying, how can you tell if you're looking at a god or a devil?

Richards:
Most fear the good visible sounds and why the devil's tail in all brains thrashing repairs to its sound.

Sample Translations:
jubilat
Octopus
Boston Review

Hither

We came upon a room filled with a brine
of sore light so that it seemed autumn
had been tortured there and from the round
ceiling hung these three journeymen size jars
inside the first jar roiled some blond viscous
slurry and a jinn mode of circulation
none of my studies could help to explain
and equally strange were the teams of ruddy
globes all moving in a manner oblivious
to that system of torrents working inside
lo but if it wasn’t in all ways embryonic
and no matter in what world still the most
adamant machine my leader turned to me then
and with those eyes at once spectral and wet
and too much full of the living hint
and long bountiful nights so that when he pressed
his lips to mine it was a long kiss or so did it
seem we were kissing such was the congress
I felt when his eyes reached down into mine
and with such slow loving futility
but about that time standing inside a room
deep inside a hill together we were standing
there together like I say beneath the first of three
confounding jars when his eyes began lending me
all the resolve wits and fortitude I would soon
need for learning what each jar contained

The Place

I could see there was no one actually gathered in the place.
There was no regulation or foresight thumping to its core.
To me the place looked to be clipped and drained of its lard
and it would not speak to my hair. Still, the light came
with its own affection and in that way the same light can
sometimes appear again. Not that I was blessed, but eventually
the people did appear. At first they were too much together,
too much beside themselves, and so there was no choir,
no mattering, or fist to be the same in. No sooner did we
lie down together then I began to grow apart from them.
It was only then I could see the place—the whole place
and with its black rims drawing me near. To me each rim
and a plum without existence. To me the plum smeared upon a sail.
To me the sail is black, cadmium black, and so the sail was cut from the place.
To me contiguous and doubtful and with its own true minotaur beings.
To me contiguous and doubtful until nothing can move
And that now the seasons grow indifferent.
To me the place, at once virgin and morose, because there is no place.
And that it will not return, not until I wash myself before
the place. To me the place hid a gland among the people and so
there was this stink about the place. And that now these same people
graze upon it. To me the place consuming all it can, only not yet shattering,
not yet aghast, like a dry rose nailed inside a cabinet.
To me the place must have a cabinet, a cabinet to sail through,
only we mustn’t go inside. To me we go inside just to keep
from seeing the place. To me the place.

Evening

I could see a small departing stage
until there were fourteen stages
each one showing an opposite rib
except for those days when there was
no rib when even long division relies
poorly on my own acuity
as though more beneficial to me
is the rib held for drawing its one
letter on a mound of excited feldspar
all my life the excited feldspar
except for those days when I held
the rib for pointing onward
the rib in all its fourteen different
mosses and the one sound predicate
was the rib finding its way

Phillis Levin (issue 3) is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *Mercury* (2001) and *May Day* (2008), both from Penguin, and is the editor of *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet: 500 Years of a Classic Tradition in English* (Penguin, 2001). Her honors include the Poetry Society of America's Norma Farber First Book Award, a Fulbright Scholar Award to Slovenia, the Amy Lowell Poetry Travelling Scholarship, the Richard Hugo Prize from *Poetry Northwest,* and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. Levin is a professor of English and the poet-in-residence at Hofstra University. She lives in Manhattan. Author photo (c) Sheila McKinnon.

Transom:
How did you come to translate Šalamun's work?

Levin:
I met Tomaž Šalamun in January 1987, when we were both resident fellows at The MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. Tomaž, who had read some of my poems, approached me on a snow-covered path as I was walking back to my studio one afternoon. We started talking, and he asked me what I was working on; I told him that I was struggling with a poem concerning Jonah, to which he replied, pointing at a ring I always wore (a Florentine stone mosaic depicting a dove on a background of black onyx), "Do you have a Bible?" I told him that I had one in my studio, among the many other books I had shipped to MacDowell; and he said I should look again at the Book of Jonah. We spoke a bit more, and he told me that he strongly connected to my poems, that they made him think of the architect Borromini. He said I was not an American poet, though of course he knew I was an American. We spoke at some length in the bitter cold, and for the rest of the time our residencies overlapped we engaged in marvelously intense conversations every evening after dinner. Of course I was eager to read his work. Not knowing any Slovenian I looked at some translations, which at that point most likely were those done by Michael Biggins, Anselm Hollo, or Charles Simic. When I returned to my studio I opened up to the Book of Jonah, which I had read often enough without ever paying attention to the introductory note, where I learned to my amazement that the name Jonah means "dove." So that is why Tomaz was pointing to the ring on my finger, a ring whose beautiful image haunted me in nightmares from which I awoke believing that the bird had flown away, leaving behind a blinding darkness. The thrill of this connection further intensified when I discovered Tomaž's poem, "Jonah." That initial encounter confirmed that there was a deep affinity between us.

Perhaps my intuitive connection to the force field of Tomaž's poems made him feel that I one day could collaborate with him on translations and made me receptive to the possibility from the moment he proposed it. But years before I ever began to translate Šalamun's work, he had translated a group of my poems without even telling me he had done so (it was a surprise, a gift from one poet to another). Some of these poems ended up being published in 1989 in an issue of Literatura, one of Slovenia's preeminent literary journals; the issue included a feature on work by ten American poets selected and introduced by Aleš Debeljak, who soon became one of Slovenia's leading poets and an internationally recognized cultural critic. One thing led to the next (certainly this invitation must have been influenced by Tomaž Šalamun and Aleš Debeljak) and I was invited to attend the International PEN Conference in Bled, Slovenia in May of 1993. It is easy for me to say that I fell in love with the country at first sight. It is also true that an immersion in the landscape and the sounds of the language gave me a more visceral understanding of the complex worlds shaping not only Tomaž's poetry but the work of many other extraordinary writers whose homeland is Slovenia and Slovene.

Not long after visiting Bled, I was invited to apply for a Fulbright Fellowship to Slovenia. I lived in Ljubljana in 1995 from June until October, traveling throughout the country, usually in the company of writers and artists I met though Tomaž and his incredible wife, the painter Metka Krašovec. I had many chances to meet with Slovenian poets, and at some point embarked on collaborative translations with a few of them. With Tomaž Šalamun, the process became an ongoing one—that is, a few years later, when he was living in New York City as the Cultural Attaché to the Slovenian Consulate, we met regularly, sometimes several hours each week, translating a small number of poems in each session. In some cases, not many words would change from Tomaž's raw English version to the finished translation; but we would easily spend an hour or two on each poem in order to convey the syntax and rhythms and semantics as closely as possible, or to find analogues in English (an effort, sometimes, at the impossible) for allusions or colloquialisms or metaphors.

Tomaž would show me his literal translation in English, read me the poem in Slovenian, and then we would go to work.

Transom:
What relationships do you see between Šalamun's work and your own?

Levin:
It is difficult to describe the effect of Šalamun's poems on my imagination and on my own poetic sensibility: I could start by mentioning the Dionysian power and the juxtaposition of extreme subjectivity with vivid historical allusion. The immediacy of his voice, a presence that leaves its mark even in the roughest of translations, cannot be explained logically, though it is an experience many others have had by now. This is not the place to explicate Tomaž's work or explore his style, but I will say that I felt an immediate identification with the persona and energy of many of his poems, despite our coming of age in radically different times and places. And I identified with the sheer nerve and liberating joyousness in his work—a freedom of imagination that seemed uncannily familiar, bringing me back to my earliest intuitions and perceptions while hurling me forward into an utterly new aesthetic experience.

From childhood, I had a conception of the poet's role as being vatic, oracular, and of the poet's voice, however private in its utterance, occupying a public space. Perhaps seeing Robert Frost on television at John F. Kennedy's inauguration had a subliminal effect; but I suspect this only confirmed a sense I had already developed as a result of early reading and from hearing my parents recite poems from books or from memory (my father frequently intoned stanzas without any provocation or warning). The urgency to make a poem began and still begins as a physical sensation. I can also confess here that when I read Tomaž's "Folk Song," which begins, "Every true poet is a monster," there was a shock of recognition, for as a child I was sometimes called a monster for saying the things I thought and for being so single-mindedly focused on writing, so sure of my destiny, so stubbornly believing that poetry was of essential value. Though my parents seemed to love poetry, they were alarmed (to put it mildly) when they realized I might become a poet.

Tomaž's fearless declarative statements encapsulate the immense weight of any act of creation as well as the comic self-awareness a poet—or any person—needs in order to stay true to one's calling. Spending time in Slovenia, meeting not only artists and writers but people from all walks of life, I was exposed to a culture that validated poetry and the poet in a way I had always envisioned.

My poems have always been lyric in nature, generated by sound and rhythm and image more than any clear narrative, although a shadow of narrative evolves in the process of the poem's unfolding. This is another reason why Tomaž's work meant so much for me from the start, because at the time I met him it was rare for me to find someone who understood what I was doing, what I was trying to do in language. He grasped my technique and the metaphysical nature of my work and the inner workings of my method. Naturally, I gravitated toward a poet who seemed so "other" in some ways, yet with whom I found such a kinship.

Transom:
Your poem in our current issue is deceptively slippery, couching in fairly straightforward language an obsession with what's not being said and with what can't be seen. "Journal" articulates those limits in terms of privacy, and we wonder: Does one "keep a secret alive" by just not quite telling it? Is that also how one keeps a poem alive? Or put another way, who is the addressee in this poem?

Levin:
Originally, my sense of the speaker of "Journal" was the journal (or logbook or diary) itself, as an object. Only in a very last set of revisions did the first person singular enter the opening stanza of the poem; in all previous drafts the "I" appears only in the poem's closing parenthetical statement. But all along, my sense of the addressee was anyone or any creature capable of finding and reading this human artifact.

In the first drafts of the poem there was no punctuation at all—only a series of blank spaces separating pauses of breath and thought; and sometimes I wonder whether introducing commas has undermined the fissures I wanted to make manifest, and which served as visual evidence of whatever is missing because it is secret or has been eroded or excised. For now, though, I'm trusting that the words themselves, the very syntax and phrase structure, are suggestive of the lacunae that are the central mystery of the poem and probably its generating source.

All poems, I believe, are secretive by nature (though not necessarily "private"); language itself is secreting something fleeting and real, and the drive to make a poem involves in part the desire to make palpable something that seems impossible to articulate. Through pulse and image, through associations of sound and meaning, something is uttered that the poet can barely grasp or understand. "Journal" explores how little of what any person experiences can be recorded. It also faces how even an elaborate record of one's life may eventually reflect less and less of what one does, what one feels, and what one thinks—because one may change how much one may want to conceal or reveal of oneself and one's history; or because one has decided to "remove" certain information; or because information one wanted to reveal to the world has been removed from the world by someone who wanted to suppress it; or because time itself intervenes and the material on which the words appear decays or is destroyed.

Somehow, dwelling on and within this disturbing understanding—of how much of what we think we will leave behind may indeed disappear, be lost or annihilated—led to a quite terrifying vision of the death of the planet Earth. I had no idea the poem would be moving in that direction when I began it, though that move looks inevitable in retrospect. My sense of keeping secrets alive does not depend on withholding anything as much as grasping the facts of the natural world, where information invisible to the eye or inaccessible to other senses is encoded yet translatable (if we learn the language that generates it or in which it resides). Everything alive keeps a secret, and as a species we are constantly in touch with the secret inner life of ourselves and of the world of nature. When I look at a tree I feel connected to it, but I don't really understand how or why; I know the tree is keeping alive its secret and I want it to reveal itself to me just as I want to be revealed to it or someone else. But we cannot reveal without concealing: the word "reveal" means to re-veil. Remember Casper the Friendly Ghost? We only see him when he puts that sheet back on. One doesn't have to try not to tell something for it to be secret; every time we unveil something a new secret appears. This is evident in the fields of biology, physics, or chemistry, and it is just as true in the field of poetry. The conceit of the poem, the analogy that "Journal" ends up drawing, can crudely be reduced to saying that the physical condition of the written record anyone leaves behind is analogous to the state of the earth after the death of the sun. As if the globe were to become, in the distant future, a token, a memento mori—of what? Does the unnamable become a divinity by virtue of being unnamable? The poem's most intimate utterance may be the confession (in parenthesis) that whoever is speaking or writing these words, whoever has left this document, does not want to leave whatever place or state of being he or she currently inhabits, does not want to leave the particular eternity of a particular present tense. Why this is so is never said. Maybe my instinctively introverted, private nature precludes me from specifying a scenario or reason eliciting this desire; or maybe I am a bit shy about admitting my own bliss.

And this brings us back to why Tomaž is so electric, so central, so affirming, in the way that Blake and Whitman and Dickinson are, and in the way only he is, in how what seems most public translates into the private, and what is most individual translates into a communion of joy.

Sample Translations:
Thumbscrew
Parthenon West Review

Journal

Within you will find
Many holes, entries I didn’t want
To be read, couldn’t bear to be
Missing, places torn, blotted out,
Undone by necessity.

Instead of a this only that, a naught
Over time increasing, a maturity, a
Burning away, a clearing, so to speak.
Fill it in as you will, it becomes a blind
Imagining, less than a world

Whose spiraling grasses and stars
Keep a secret alive, within reach
Of all who are kin,
Who increase, over time, this privacy,
Holding a candle to it as it multiplies.

On a day without day
This planet again will be stone,
A cavern without water or flesh, a skull
Devoid of countenance, anonymous,
Ready to express anything, including

Emptiness, the journal of a god
Whose eye sockets, once,
Were tunnels of love where someone
Such as yourself dwelled long ago—
I’m passing through one

Slowly as possible now,
I do not want to reach the
Other side (you know what I mean
If you followed me here somehow
With your hands, your eyes).

Raised in Nashville, TN, Thomas Kane (issue 3) received an MFA in creative writing from the University of Pittsburgh and is in the process of completing a PhD in creative writing at the University of Missouri. His poems have appeared in *Cerise, McSweeney's,* and *Sou'Wester*. He edited and co-translated Tomaž Šalamun's *There's the Hand and There's the Arid Chair* (Counterpath, 2009).

Transom:
How did you come to translate Šalamun's work?

Kane:
He was a visiting professor at the University of Pittsburgh when I was doing my MFA there. There were a few small coincidences that brought us together in the first place, if I remember correctly. I had invented a character named Bertrand that I was writing a series of poems about at the time, and it was a name that he had used before; we both had similarly strong reactions to a Neo Rauch painting at the 2005 Carnegie International. Things like that. I call them small coincidences, but that's not entirely fair of me. If you think about the connections that exist in his poems—how they sometimes (and amazingly) seem to be both inexplicable and absolutely necessary—what we might think of as coincidental he thinks of as demonstrating a certain imminence. He can locate a whole universe in a Neo Rauch painting, and so for us to both be as moved by it as we were suggested, I think, an aesthetic common ground that he felt might be productive within the poetic space. And we got a lot done the first semester he was there, so he came back to Pittsburgh every spring that I was there, and we finished working on There's the Hand and There's the Arid Chair over the course of those three years.

Transom:
What relationships do you see between Šalamun's work and your own?

Kane:
Kind of going off what I was talking about above, I think I inherited a fascination with anomaly from Tomaž. More specifically, I think I inherited a fascination with the way in which what seems anomalous oftentimes isn't. I've always admired the fluidity and fearlessness of his imagination; his poems read like sublime declarations of faith to me a lot of the time. When I'm working on my own stuff, I think I always have his trust in the relatedness of things in the back of my mind. It's not an invitation to not make sense but a push to make new sense of things, and I think that's what I find most fun about writing poems.

And, honestly, having fun within the poem is also a big part of what I learned from Tomaž. He's so skilled at reminding us that playfulness and meaningfulness aren't mutually exclusive, and that's certainly something that I want to be able to articulate in my own poems.

Transom:
Your poem is entitled, "Three Prologues for a Play Cycle Concerning Song." In traditional stagecraft, the prologue is a direct address from an actor to the audience. It helps transition the audience from their "real" lives to the invented world of the play. What we have in your poem, then, is a series of bridges crossing into different realities. Do you believe that the poet speaks from between worlds?

Kane:
I've always thought that this capacity to be two-worlded was at least part of what Williams was talking about with 'no ideas but in things'—that there's a certain amount of preservation and maybe even a little bit of mourning that's simultaneous with the act of poetic invention, and that this simultaneity is of incredible importance to art. Without a foot in each universe, I think the imagination runs the risk of becoming sterile and overly formal in its ambitions. And so, yeah, I do think that, in general, the poet speaks from both worlds, and I definitely hope that comes across in my poems. That's why I think the prologue is such an interesting moment in the play. It champions the self-invented quality of the artwork in a way that refuses to sever the relationship between invention and reality.

Sample Translations:
Cerise Press
Shampoo
Slope

Three Prologues for a Play Cycle Concerning Song

1. For a Play About the Early Life of John Brown

There was a revival of singing in Canton and our family became singers
—John Brown

For a teacup lamb or a squirrel or for a mother.
A child weeps, but is not the world
weeping? Which is to say: A revival is
in the making, and will not the world be
suddenly song? As a boy raised by
the woods becomes the woods. Just as one
who's known the switch will always know it.
And don't you see? There's a pattern forming.
A father who ranches and a son who herds.
A tempest God and his rascal proxy.
Think about it: Is not the world a straight line
or a tree? Is not this world, at all times, work?

*

3. For a Play About Bird-in-Hand and Everywhere Else

A boy who raises horses won't always
raise horses. No,
there will come a day when he hears
King Floyd, when he hears of Maybellene
from all the Buicks that lament her. He will
think, This is what is meant by being in flight.
This is what men mean when they plead
to be fevered, to be grooved. And it's like this
everywhere. Teenagers new with movement.
Court squares lapped slowly
by cars in unison song. And in the basement
at St. Stephen's of Hungary, hips shake
most un-divine. It's Friday night,
and they know they shouldn't, but still they do.

Brian Henry (issue 3) is the author of eight books of poetry—*Astronaut* (short-listed for the Forward Prize), *American Incident*, *Graft*, *Quarantine*, *The Stripping Point*, *Wings Without Birds*, *Lessness*, and *Doppelgänger*. His work has been translated into Croatian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Slovenian, and Spanish. His translation of Tomaž Šalamun's *Woods and Chalices* appeared from Harcourt in 2008, and his translation of Aleš Šteger's *The Book of Things* appeared as a Lannan Foundation selection from BOA Editions in 2010 and won the 2011 Best Translated Book Award. Henry's poetry and translations have received numerous honors, including an NEA fellowship, a Howard Foundation grant, the Alice Fay di Castagnola Award, the Carole Weinstein Poetry Prize, the Cecil B. Hemley Memorial Award, the George Bogin Memorial Award, and a Slovenian Academy of Arts and Sciences grant. Author photo (c) 2011 Susan Worsham.

Transom:
How did you come to translate Šalamun's work?

Henry:
I'd been reading Tomaž's poems for about 10 years and had been friends with him for nearly that long before I started translating him in 2006. I'd always been interested in translation, but didn't trust my knowledge of foreign languages (French, Spanish, and Latin, which I'd studied). But after noticing that none of Tomaž's co-translators actually knew Slovenian, I thought I should give it a try. After all, I knew his work in English well, and we had a strong friendship. So I suggested that we do a book together. Because my favorite book by Tomaž in English was A Ballad for Metka Krašovec (translated by Michael Biggins), I wanted to do a cohesive book rather than a selection from multiple books. So Tomaž and I decided to work on Gozd in kelihi, which became Woods and Chalices. Initially, the process worked the same way Tomaž's other co-translated books work: he does a literal version and the co-translator makes it work as a poem in English. But I wanted to work with the original Slovenian, not just Tomaž's literal versions, and about 2/3 of our way through the book, I started doing the initial versions myself and sending them to Tomaž for corrections.

Transom:
What relationships do you see between Šalamun's work and your own?

Henry:
I openly emulated some of his work in a couple of my earlier poems (e.g., the proem to Astronaut, which was inspired by the format of "Jonah"). Generally, I think that Tomaž and I both use poetry as a way of seeking, and as a way of connecting. We both have written a lot of poems with high energy and speed. And we try to stretch the language. But the relationship between Tomaž's poetry and my own extended beyond these correspondences when I started translating his poems.

Although I'd written dozens of sonnets of many different kinds before translating Tomaž's poems, working within his primary unit (the 14-liner / unrhymed sonnet) and working with his syntax (and image, statement, and juxtaposition) led to an explosion of sonnets unlike anything I'd written before. That 14-line space is one I was already comfortable with--as a unit of composition and thought and music--but translating Tomaž's 14-liners pushed me to reconfigure that space. It rewired my brain in a way.

Transom:
In "Winter Street" you say "The body is a money pit / for the soul." (In "Folk Song," Šalamun says, "Only the poet sells his soul to separate it / from the body that he loves" [Tr. Charles Simic].) Your poem seems very concerned with the metaphysics of such dualities – body/soul, solid/liquid, interior/exterior – and with their potential synthesis, the functional identity between winter flood and winter street. What sort of relationship between image and idea, between image and argument, do you strive for in your poetry?

Henry:
I don't think I strive for those things consciously. For the past few years, I've been trying to look very closely at things, to develop a quality of attention that carries over to the language. Sometimes that quality of attention yields not only images but also ideas and arguments (and impasses and despair at these impasses). The physical (the body) is one of my primary concerns--as a human and as a poet--but I'm always looking to mess up any neat distinctions. I wrote "Winter Street" in New Hampshire. A lot of my poems occur around rivers, which seem to embody both the dualities and synthesis that you mentioned: you have a body of water that, by definition, flows but can freeze; it is also defined by its banks, but those can shift or, in winter, gather skirts of ice; and a river can overstep its natural boundaries.

Further notes:
from Henry's prose manuscript, *Things are Completely Simple*:

The one liberty I took with Šalamun's poems was with sound. Because translating a sound pattern, or thread, straight from Slovenian into English is not possible, I would work the translation, usually on the fly, to recreate a similar kind of sound pattern in English, sometimes in the line before or after. This might mean choosing a word that's less faithful (in terms of meaning) but that sounds much better with the words already on the page. For me, the minor loss in literal meaning is more than compensated by the sonic gains.

*
With Šalamun, are the originals always the versions of the poems in Slovenian? If he performs an initial translation himself—into English or any other language—might the original be the combination of the Slovenian and English versions? If someone else translates the poem from scratch, then we can be more certain saying that the original is the poem in Slovenian. But if the author brings the poem into existence in two languages, in whatever order, can we be sure that the original version is necessarily the first?

*

Girded by the poet's own desire to have the poems function in English as poems in English, I have been more willing to let go of some meaning in the original in order to make the poem work in English. Sometimes an exact translation isn't possible (not every word has an equivalent in another language); or if it's possible, it would be too wordy or awkward.

But the translated poem should contain a certain amount of strangeness—not exoticized foreignness, but a reminder that the poem originated elsewhere. Translators need to resist English's tendency to absorb everything. However important a poet like Šalamun is to American poetry readers, his work cannot be Americanized.

In the course of their correspondence, Šalamun tried to answer many of Henry's questions about specific lines. These are excerpts from one such answer:

Zdrobiti piko mamici means exactly to crush the dot to mom. Let's leave it. As if mother would have a dot and the son would crush it. Of course the dot is not corporeal and we couldn't crush it and why the mom would have a dot and what it would look like we don't know and cannot imagine. This is the clue for my writing. This is the disturbing part that it makes no sense. Pika here is a dot, not period. There's a possible subconscious English perversion, but it should stay hidden. Period would destroy everything here. The fact that it doesn't make sense makes it a line.

Sopsti po melishchih is utterly weird in Slovenian, it should stay like this, "around scree" I feel as logifying, better is "on screes." "On" is more physical, the fact that it happens on many screes not only to one is more interesting. I'm a destroyer of images, I don't make images, I block them deep in the ground.

Please let leave “Sinking stools, you can’t pierce water!” Maybe the exclamation point is missing. The stools are sinking and I’m telling them that they cannot pierce water. That’s all. They’re sinking already, we cannot add because etc. Don’t try to tame my crystal madness. Things are completely simple. I only describe what they do or they do what I order them to do. And they like to do what was not done before.

Sample Translations:
Jacket
RealPoetik
Blackbird

Winter Street

1.

No day when some part of you,
a part
previously unknown

feverdust absentia | splendor floe | bacterial regalia
feverdust absentia | splendor floe | bacterial regalia
feverdust absentia | splendor floe | bacterial regalia

See how things break down?

The body is a money pit
for the soul.

*

6.

The sun-slicked path
borrows its direction
from the river, pocked
with ice-crops and snow.
Ice-corpse and snow.
One stone has been cut
clean through the center,
the inner meat removed,
now notch through which.
Further downstream, a stone
is sandwiched between chunks
of ice, the water moves
coldly around it.