

Event: Translating Trauma: Poetry, Self & Other

Event Description: Trauma is universal, but since 2020 it has become vital that we explore our relationship to trauma and our translation of that trauma into words, between languages, from ourselves to others and from others to ourselves. This panel will explore personal and political traumas and their translations in and out of language and meaning across a variety of poetry, examining the wider implications of translation beyond just its literary usage.

Event Category: Translation

Event Organizer & Moderator: Yolande Schutter

Event Participants & Biographies:

- Yolande Schutter is a doctoral candidate & adjunct professor of English & Creative Writing at SUNY at Albany. Her poetry & translations have been featured in *Poems for the Millennium: The University of California Book of North African Literature*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Rattapallax*, and *CELAAN*.
- Claire Foster is a literary translator from French based in Toronto, where she also works as a bookseller at Type Books. Her translation of Pierre Clémenti's memoir, "*A Few Personal Messages*," is forthcoming from Small Press.
- Catherine Pond is the author of *FIELDGLASS* (SIU Press 2021), winner of the Crab Orchard First Book Prize in Poetry. Her poems have appeared in *Best New Poets*, *Best American Nonrequired Reading*, *AGNI*, *The Adroit Journal*, & more. She is a PhD candidate at the University of Southern California.
- Dan Kraines is the author of the chapbook *Licht*, forthcoming from Seven Kitchens Press. His translation of Goethe's *Erkönig* appeared in *Queen Mob's Teahouse* queer translations issue. He holds a PhD in literary criticism and queer poetics from the University of Rochester and he lives in NYC.

Event Outline:

- Brief opening remarks by Yolande Schutter.
- "Assia Djebar: Translating (Post)Colonial Trauma" by Yolande Schutter
- "Notes on Translating Silence, Starvation, and the Color Green in Pierre Clémenti's *A Few Personal Messages*" by Claire Foster
- "The Secret of the Ferns: Celan in Translation" by Catherine Pond
- "The Erkling" by Dan Kraines

Assia Djébar: Translating (Post)Colonial Trauma

“The lyric poets of the people, in the brouhaha of the markets, in the depths of the dark taverns, in the dust of the douars, they do not dream. They look. In this surrounded age, they are our journalists: they describe, they analyze, they accuse.”

--Assia Djébar, “Popular Algerian poetry since 1830.”

For Algerian writer and poet Assia Djébar, translation begins at the heart of the experience of trauma. Raised in French colonized Algeria, Djébar was also raised in both the Arabic and French languages. Outside of the conflict commonly referred to as “the question of language” in colonial and (post)colonial spaces—which language to speak in and which to write in, which language “belongs” where and to whom—the trauma of language for Djébar begins much earlier. Though she does not possess the Berber languages of her ancestry, these languages haunt her writing throughout her lifetime. After all, even the Arabic language was, at its outset in North Africa, the language of an earlier colonizer.

Thus, for Djébar, the translation of experience into language is, from the first, already a trauma itself. Having little grasp of Berber languages and only a rudimentary relationship with Arabic, she writes almost exclusively in French. Writing in the language of the colonizer is a fraught experience; for Djébar, it is at once less and even more complex. More so because unlike many (post)colonial writers in her position, she does not have much of a choice in the matter. French is and always has been the language of literature for her. Yet, haunted as she is by her heritage, Arabic never really belonged to her, and despite feeling the presence of the Berber languages within her own history and writing, being unable to write in them is less keenly felt because the Berber literary tradition is an oral one, and when translated to the page, was often delivered, by choice, in a language other than its original.

Djebar's lack of choice in the so-called question of language illustrates on a smaller scale a larger trauma which she spent her life working through. The question of how to write in colonial French haunted both by Berber and Arabic morphs into the question of how to write in any language at all—how to translate experience into words. Najat Rahman writes that the implication in all of Djebar's writing "is the impossibility to speak from the 'inside', in ones' 'mother tongue'. What is being 'testified to' is absence, as the burden of heritage" and ultimately as the burden of the expression of writing (Rahman 73). All of Djebar's writing is, indeed, translation and is thus subject to the gains and losses therein.

Alienated as she is from written expression from the start, Djebar finds herself in a position that is both intimate with the failures of translation as well as its unique possibilities. While language does not always admit its shortcomings, translation and its theories have long been tangled up in the problem of its necessary failures. This, for Djebar, works to her advantage. The admission of failure is present at the beginning of expression. Djebar thus builds a written oeuvre that works from this lack, translating discontinuity, irreparable difference, and fragmentation into language.

Hervé Sanson writes (translation my own) that "the ethical value of Djebar's relationship to translation in her work" is that "*it will never amount to the same thing*" as experience and as a result, "it is suitable, beyond the loss of an ancestral culture, to cultivate the linguistic differential" (Sanson 6). And so the process of translation for Djebar becomes "an operation of transmutation, of the transportation of sediments between languages, of traces, of ruins, of vestiges" (6). The failure at the heart of translation studies is not only the space from which Djebar is able to transfer trauma into language, but also the space from which to rewrite the historical narrative and serve as a witness to others' trauma. As Rahman puts it, echoing Walter

Benjamin, “It is translation as a fragment of a fragment that bears the tension of the necessity of witnessing and the impossibility of doing so” (Rahman 72). The play between the impossibility and necessity of witnessing and translating what she witnesses and experiences to language permeates Djébar’s work—her prose, of course, but her little-known poetry as well.

Poèmes pour l’Algérie heureuse (Poems for a happy Algeria) was published in 1969 and is Djébar’s first and only collection of poems. In a time when research on Djébar has only been increasing, it is interesting to note the lack of attention given to her poetry. Poetic works are often overlooked from writers who are well known for their prose, and in Djébar’s case, for her theater, memoirs, essays, and films as well. Yet the importance of the poetic tradition in North Africa cannot be overstated. There are the imported French and Arabic poetic traditions, both with their Mediterranean influences and both having become, at least to some degree, native to the Maghreb. But the shadow of Djébar’s Berber heritage looms large in this area as well. The Berber poetic tradition remains strong and, traditionally speaking, it is guarded by Berber women specifically. There is a poetic lineage that creates an undeniable through line to Djébar and her own writing which is further demonstrated by her inclusion of modern 20th century poems by Algerian meddahs within her poetry collection. Each section of *Poems for a happy Algeria* is preceded by one such poem, clearly illustrating the relationship between her poetry, the female guardians of the tradition, and the oral bards of her Berber heritage.

The tracing of this tradition within her collection puts forth an argument for the importance of Djébar’s poetry in understanding her as a writer. And so, in this spirit, I will read two of her poems to conclude this presentation, “The Exiled” and “The Walking Man”, which I’ve translated from French as part of a larger translation project.

THE EXILED

I know Cicero in Latin
Like the Berber Saint Augustine
I knew Socrates in his own language
And the same with Isocrates's speeches.

I have loved Eleanor's
and her court's French troubadour
Even when I dream of Arabia
Rimbaud's voice follows me.

But in the abyss of my memory
Lullabies legends or disappointments
The song of my tongue has lost itself
Like a daydream of summer beneath the mangoes.

Marching in a thousand rebuses
Hordes of zebras and zebus
The ancient words of my ancestors
Their letters are in arabesques.

Voiceless where my blood pulses
What's the use of making the dog a scholar
And with others the conquests
I have never laughed at their parties.

At the zenith of my exile
Beneath a hieroglyphic sun
Ardent like the coral reef
Our poems of the year 1,000 burn.

I know Cicero in Latin
Like the Berber Saint Augustine
Henceforth our mandarin treasures
They are the cries of the starving.

Beauty everywhere sovereign
Only its roots incendiary.

THE WALKING MAN

I.

The walking man walks
Sometimes in the night sometimes in the light
In the light of artifice
Of projectors
Of words
Sometimes in the night
In the difficult night.

On the banks the others
Disarmed of darkness
Innocent of all crime if not of pity
Watch
Spectators of the journey
Are they afraid of the shipwreck
The drift is not out at sea
Ashes in their delirious heart
Behind the walking man.

The walking man walks
His vehement memory
We tell him he needs to learn
To speak to protest to gesticulate
We tell him that freedom
Feeds itself also on publicity
A well-taken photo and well-said phrase
Captures the hearts the feelings
Of the gentle the tender and the indifferent
Of the blessed who sleep
Of the hangman's wife
Of the others
We explain to him that the song
Buys you time
On the sweat and on the blood
We are no longer in the era of the Barbarians
Without lyricism
Without history

The walking man walks
On his heels the poet
Hop-hopping on one leg
On the shadow of a mute face

II

III

Shadow of death shadow of clear
Shadow of shadow
Of reality

I have nothing said the man
I have nothing to say
Simply I am tired I am tired I am stunned
Why announce it
The pains are duller despite the wind the sea retreats the desert slips
And the gold what gold thrown on the sun
I swear to you I have nothing to say
The lights blind me and the lighthouses
I need the night I need suicide
I need to spit out my burning lungs
I am tired said the man I don't want to say it
The road will be hard the slope steep
I don't have the heart to sing
I am done in I have nothing to say
For the future

The silence in our place is not in style
It's a beast that we are tracking
The silence what innocence
I liberate nothing of your passion
If you refuse our images
If you feel in our expressions
We cannot celebrate the martyr
The simple image of your tatters
Chases all ceremony
Now at the end of the party you must receive
A triumph
Of applause
It is well for you to scorn victory
It is well for you to avoid mirrors
If you want to exhale to stop yourself to find yourself
If you do not want to run away in the forest
If you want to sleep
If you want to forget
If you want to live
If you do you well to pass by

Shadow of death shadow of cleaver
Shadow of shadow
Of reality.

THE WALKING MAN

II.

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Simply I am tired I am tired I am stunned
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On his heels the poet
Hopping on one leg
On the shadow of a mute face

To dress yourself with our language.
To be hailed as a rebel or crowned as a king
Or to kill in the public arena why not
Panache and glory and the death of the hero
The laurels of words are at our place
It is the weapons that are
Treasures on the shingle
That we offer with regret to our fellow men
The Barbarians doubtless have one single history of blood
To contain the hounds to conquer the demons
Monsters of our memories of our mythologies
Of our hymns of glory of our identity
We
We deliver, castrated,
Our vocabulary.

The walking man walks
Without fail without rest.

Works Cited

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- Sanson, Hervé. "D'une éthique de la traduction: Assia Djebar ou les apories de l'écriture en langue française." *Multilinguales*, vol. 6, 2015, pp. 1-10.

Notes on Translating Silence, Starvation, and the Color Green in Pierre Clémenti's *A Few Personal Messages*

I recently completed my first full-length translation, the memoir of French actor Pierre Clémenti, *A Few Personal Messages* (*Quelques messages personnels*), which was published in France in 1973 and re-issued in 2005 (Clémenti died in 1999, at the age of 57). Clémenti is perhaps best known for his role in *Belle de Jour* by Louis Buñuel, in which he plays a silver-toothed, leather-booted criminal who becomes involved with Catherine Deneuve's character, Severine. But he felt that his home, in film, was in Italy. He acted in numerous Italian films; was friends with, and a long-haired muse for, Bertolucci, Pasolini, Visconti. However, in 1971, in Rome, he was arrested for drug possession, and was imprisoned for 18 months (first in Regina Coeli, then Rebibbia) while awaiting trial. He and many others were convinced that this was a bogus charge, that the drugs were planted, that he was arrested because of his countercultural, leftist politics—and indeed, he was eventually released due to insufficient evidence.

In prison, Clémenti's instruments of resistance were rooted in translations of various kinds, though none dealt in words. Today I'm going to explore three examples of self-translation that I translated in Clémenti—his ways of translating the perpetually traumatized state of the prisoner into something tangible and legible, and beyond words, which was impossible to be misunderstood in French or Italian or any of the other languages that swirled within the prison's corridors. For Clémenti, these methods were silence (the translation of systematic miscomprehension into muteness), starvation (the translation of crisis into lightness), and painting (the translation of trauma into the color green). And it is in my third part, on Clémenti's greens, that I will go a little in detail about my translation and read the French original alongside my English version.

The subject of silence in translation was interestingly explored in Anne Carson's essay called "Variations on the Right to Remain Silent"—an apt title for my purposes here, considering Clémenti's heavily policed existence in prison. Carson begins: "Silence is as important as words in the practice and study of translation." In this essay, Carson connects Joan of Arc, the paintings of Francis Bacon, the translations of Hölderlin, and a poem by Paul Celan, forming a constellation of silences, untranslatables, and catastrophes. Of Joan of Arc she writes, and I transpose her words to speak towards Clémenti: "it is her rage against cliché that draws me to her. A genius is in her rage. We all feel this rage at some level, at some time. The genius answer to it is catastrophe." In all these poets, artists, and radicals she homes in on each of their "manipulation[s] of catastrophe, [...] a catastrophizing of translation." She invokes stammering in her discussion of Paul Celan's poem in praise of Hölderlin, "Tübingen, January," in whose final stanza reside the lines: / if he spoke of this / time, he / could / only stammer and stammer / over-, over- / againagain." What follows are some of Carson's translations, which she also calls "a sort of stammering."

Returning to Hölderlin, she writes that "What fascinates me is to see his catastrophe, at whatever level of consciousness he chose it, as a method extracted from translation, a method organized by the rage against cliché." (24) And I see the same catastrophe—a translated trauma—in Clémenti, who similarly extracted from translation a method organized by the rage against prison's machine. I'll turn here to several passages I translated in which Clémenti explains his refusal to articulate himself in words to others, in prison and during the trial, opting instead for he called a "healing stillness, [a] blazing silence" (130): "Every now and then, you must stand up for yourself with silence and say nothing before those who have come to examine and judge you. You must force them to consider who you are so they can begin to understand that what they seek to locate in you

is their own guilt, or their own innocence. In my silence, I wanted my judges to realize that I owed them nothing, that I had the same right to refusal as they did. This muteness made them hear the very sound of their judgment. (83) “My silence denounced the farce of their questions.” (85)

He continues, in my words: “When I heard this hypocritical, nauseatingly servile couplet, and realized that this was why they gave me two years, I knew that I had been right to meet them with silence, to let them go to the end of their logic. I felt immense joy, a confirmation that my place was right there, on the outcast’s bench, in prisons, and that from then on I needed to use the time given to me to accomplish the most important task of my life: to fight and create with my imprisoned brothers.” (87-8)

Clémenti does in silence a version of what I hope to do in my translation—to take his text from French to the beginning of a new logic in English (but never the end of a logic, for translations ought always to be in motion). Translation is a loose logic. Reading Clémenti’s silence, I think of Sawako Nakayasu in her radical chapbook-essay-poem, *Say Translation Is Art*, in which she stretches the stitches of translation to encompass dance, music, anarchy, action, protest, poetry, translation elastic and open: for Nakayasu, translation can be wrong, can be wilted, can be world-making: “say outsider translation” (17); “say Defund the Police translation” (13); “say break and rebuild everything via translation” (19).

Moving now from the throat to the stomach, from silence to starvation, I enter into thinking about the body as a site of translation, specifically Pierre Clémenti’s emaciated body not only in prison but until his death. The images you’ve been seeing and see now are from his autobiographical short film-poem, *Soleil*, which he made in 1988, a dream-like, abstracted image-sound collage that begins with a sort of re-staging of his arrest in Rome.

Clémenti writes, in my words, of his decision to begin refusing food in prison: “It was ultimately to save myself that I retreated. Like the swimmer who, caught suddenly in a whirlpool, has only one way out: to sink passively to the bottom and push himself up to the surface. [...] After the silence, after the isolation, after weeks in a vegetative state, rebellion took hold. [...] The only weapon available to a prisoner is himself, his body. I refused to eat, I sent back full trays to the kitchen, many times, many days in a row. [...] The warden was moved by this. Hunger strikes—this violence enacted by the weak—hit a sensitive spot for the bourgeois: it reveals their shame in eating like princes among the poor.” (46)

“Your absences become a force of extreme negation. And your body starts bearing the scars of crisis. You will be the (still) living proof of the machine’s very logic, and thus unacceptable to it. The machine destroys men, and if you look at me, you’ll see that I’m the very portrait of destruction. The machine ravages bodies and breaks spirits. And I bring its truth to the most severe consequences. I am the most logical of its products. [...] I refused all food other than water and the daily bread and my cell became a dungeon, though it remained full of light.” (132)

When translating these passages, I felt myself sit up a little higher, I remembered my body and its role in translation—not only in the grace of my fingers typing his words into a new language—essentially writing his book again, in English—and of my eyes darting between a split screen (original on left, new document on right), but also my arms, my ribs, my stomach, my shoulders. Clémenti implicated my too-frequently-invisible translator’s body. He taught me, through my linguistic translation of his bodily translation, that my body was an instrument of translation, too. Sawako Nakayasu again: “say I translate with my body, say my body is not the same as your body (KB), say my body produces bags of shit, one heat-seeking bag of shit and another heat-seeking

bag of shit translation, translation into and out of continuous inferno, translatable bags of shit, because we cannot scream we translate. (DB).” Because Clémenti cannot scream—rather, because his screams cannot be heard or, if they are heard they are not cared for—he starves. After Nakayasu, I forge: Say Pierre Clémenti translation, say starving shrinking striving in your prison translation, say silent translation, say no language translation, say method translation, say deterioration translation.

For a long time, when I thought about Clémenti, I thought about the color purple. His bright purple socks in *Belle de Jour* were my *punctum*. But since translating the book, Clémenti has turned green in my mind. Green is the color that appeared most in the book after black (black was used to describe the color of the mass of a crowd, the black milk of fascism, black stones, black hair). However, the color green is repeated only to describe the color he used when depicting the faces of the judges, after his cell partner introduced him to painting: “The painter was right: all you had to do was feel. And perhaps there is no better place to feel than the prison cell. Cut off from the outside world, you open yourself up to the other world of your memories, and spend hours looking deep within yourself, walking towards the horizon that is your childhood. Or towards a form of madness, if the waves of memory rise and drown you. This is how prison both endangers and seduces you: it’s a place where fantasy runs wild. [...] My mentor smiled when I told him that I didn’t know how or where to begin a painting. “You paint everything all at once,” he said. And I did just that. [...] And with each naive image, I made a window through the walls. (60-1)

The next passage I’m about to show, I’ll read in the original and my translation, is one of my favorites in the book, and I wonder if it’s partially due to its rhythm—for Clémenti rarely employs stylistic techniques like parallelism or metaphor, as he does here—and partially because of a kind

of translator's laziness, the joyful simplicity in translating primary colors. What else could *vert* mean but green?

“Je suis resté une semaine à Regina Coeli après le jugement, j’ai peint, j’ai représenté mon procès pour en voir enfin le spectacle. L’estrade, le prétoire, la salle où j’ai peint chaque œil de chaque spectateur, et les juges: le vert est la couleur qui est venu sur leurs visages. Verts, parce qu’ils sont en marge de la vie, bien que sûrement ils aient foyer et famille et qu’ils s’emmerdent avec leurs femmes et leurs gosses. Verts, parce qu’ils n’ont plus le temps ni l’envie de rien connaître du monde—ils n’en voient que les dossiers, pas les hommes. Ils ne savent même plus ce qui se passe dans leur propre pays, comment vit le paysan, l’ouvrier, le chômeur, la putain, ils ne le savent pas mais ils les jugent, le dossier a parlé, le papier est le plus fort.” // I stayed at Regina Coeli for one week after the ruling, and I painted my trial so I could finally see the show. The podium, the courtroom, each eye of every person in the audience. Then I painted the judges: green is the color that came to their faces. Green, because they are on the fringes of life, even though they have a home and a family. Green, because they are bored to death by their wives and children. Green, because they have neither the time nor the inclination to know anything about the world—they see only files, not people. They don’t even know what’s happening in their own country, they don’t know anything about the lives of the peasant, the factory worker, the homeless person, the whore. They know nothing but they judge anyway. The file has spoken, and for them, paper is more important than people.”

I appreciated this opportunity to return to this text, which is being printed in a few months. I’d sent in my final edits months ago but fortunately was able to send them a new version of this passage, in light of my editing it for this conference. I was appalled to see how I’d smoothed Clémenti’s prose; where I translated “green is the color that came to their faces”—a word-for-word translation

of the French—I'd previously smoothed it over, "whose faces I'd painted green." I took the agency Clémenti gives to the paint and restored it to the painter, which was almost violently logical, an erasure, a smoothing out of green's violence. So I changed it back. Fifty pages later, he returns to this same scene: "I felt nauseous when I returned to my cell in Regina Coeli. I started painting furiously, and with a savage passion I smeared green paint upon the image of my judges. This way, they too would be damned by their image, just as they'd damned me for my own." (113-14)

I consider this repetition, deliberate or not, as a sort of stammering, a green smudged twice over. Despite the aforementioned simplicity of translating the word *vert* to green, the color green is itself wily—like Clémenti, it resists too literal an understanding; its translation is wobbly. Michel Pastoureau notes how green as a color is ambiguous, ambivalent—it's an uncertain color, a dangerous color. It is at once a symbol of life and a symbol of disorder, poison, demonic offshoots. Its history in paint is equally compelling and more complex than what I can adequately explain here, but I'll just note how green paint was a historically difficult thing to create—even more difficult to set. It resisted.

Anne Carson again, for I begin, pause, and end translation with her in mind: "Translation is a practice, a strategy, that does seem to give us a third place to be. In the presence of a word that stops itself"—or in the presence of Clémenti's silence, his ravaged body, his green paint that thinks for itself—"in that silence, one has the feeling that something has got free." (26) Thank you for your time.

The Secret of the Ferns: Celan in Translation

I'll be reading today from a non-fiction piece I'm working on about "reading" Paul Celan through the work of Anselm Kiefer, who has "translated" many of Celan's poems into artwork. This piece, in a longer format, functions as a lyric essay and represents one of my critical interests. It has been edited for time. After, I will touch on my own creative project, a book of poems called *Fieldglass*.

It's 2018 when I arrive in Berlin on a gray, autumn day. I walk down the burnt orange jet bridge, clutching my copy of Paul Celan's Collected Works under my arm. I've flown through the night from California and arrived just as the city is stirring. It is my first time in Germany. Later that day, I walk from my hotel to the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum. The museum lobby is lofty, and I enter two galleries before seeing any art. Upon entering the third gallery, I immediately find what I've come for: an Anselm Kiefer piece on the left wall. "Lilith" is scrawled across the top, and white dresses made of plaster are hooked to the canvas with barbed wire. They seem to shiver in the bright lights from the ceiling.

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Scroll back to 2015. I'm in Miami Beach, headed to the Margulies Collection on the mainland. The museum is ugly from the outside, a large warehouse with metal walls. But inside, the museum is expansive.

Several warehouse-sized rooms are devoted to Kiefer's sculptures and paintings, most of them inspired by the work of Romanian poet and Holocaust survivor Paul Celan. In the paintings, there are deserted fields under snow, train tracks running over darkened ground, flames. There are trees in winter, and books made of burnt metal in various states of disintegration, as if to suggest a failed attempt to destroy them. In his paintings and sculptures, it is either daybreak or evening (*Abend*, he had scrawled across the top of one canvas). The lead canvases are thick with acrylic, textured with fabric, dried flowers, ash, resin, cement, barbed wire. "Todesfugue," the most anthologized of Paul Celan's poems, is printed on a plaque on the wall, and indeed the Holocaust breathes in these rooms, the pain warped like metal against the canvas. The scale is astonishing.

Long after I leave the museum, I can still hear "Todesfugue" in my head: "Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening / we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night / we drink and we drink..." Indeed, the texture of Kiefer's work mirrors the texture of Celan's images: "unshod through the air, he who resembles you most: iron shoes buckled on to his delicate hands, he sleeps through the battle and summer. It's for him that the cherry bleeds."

I am surprised, later, to learn that Anselm Kiefer isn't Jewish. He was born Catholic in 1945 in Germany. For his first show, a series of photographs titled "Occupations," he dressed up in a Nazi uniform and took pictures of himself doing the "Heil Hitler" salute in countries that had been Nazi-occupied, including France. Not everyone knew what to make of it, but most critics

concluded that it was an indictment of the culture he'd grown up around, and an attempt at acknowledging the horrific history he was born into, a theory he confirmed in his later work. In a New York Times profile in 2001, reporter Alan Riding pressed him on his preoccupation with the Holocaust:

Was his attraction to Jewish mysticism, he was asked, also a product of German guilt? "There is what you call German guilt," [Kiefer] replied... "if you are German, you are connected to that era. But there is something else. Some people said, First you were researching about Germanism, now about Judaism. But it is all one thing. I cannot imagine German culture without Judaism. Everything that makes German philosophy and poetry interesting to the world is a combination of Germany and Judaism. One thing is that the Germans committed the immense crime of killing Jews. The other is that they amputated themselves. They took half of German culture and killed it."

Mother, sister, rose, well, night, snow, stone, eye, mouth. These are Paul Celan's most-used words, according to his biographer and translator, John Felstiner.

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After some early writings in Romanian, Celan wrote primarily in German, despite pressure from his friends to renounce the language of his oppressor. I came to love German through reading Paul Celan's poems, and it's a language he spent much of his life reclaiming.

My edition of his Collected Works has the original German on the left-hand side of the page, and the English on the right. I often sound out the German to myself, wanting to hear it as he had. I love Felstiner's translation of "Todesfugue," which translates it into English but allows the German language to seep in towards the end of the poem. "Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland," Celan wrote. "Death is a master in Deutschland."

I have never mastered a second language, but I have studied many. In every language I've studied, "death" is the word I always remember. From my year of studying ancient Greek, I remember the word "Thanatos." In French, "la mort." In German, "Tod" was the first word I learned. After that, it was "Wald," or forest. My favorite collection from poet Franz Wright (an American) is named Kindertotenwald. I said it over and over, taken with it, only to learn it translated to "Forest of Dead Children."

*

"Ermorden" is a word I learn only now, walking through Berlin alone towards the Tiergarten. It is written on each of the small bronze plaques that are pressed into the cobblestones outside every apartment from which a Jewish citizen was abducted by the Nazis and deported. Each plaque commemorates one victim, and reads like this: name, date of birth, date of deportation, the camp to which they were deported, and the date of their murder: Ermorden.

*

Paul Celan's family lived in Romania, in Czernowitz. The night his parents were taken from their home, he was hiding in a friend's house down the street. His parents were both killed within the year in Transnistria. He was later sent to a work camp but survived the war. In "Aspen Tree," he writes

Aspen tree, your leaves glance white into the dark.

My mother's hair was never white.

Dandelion, so green is the Ukraine.

My yellow-haired mother did not come home.

Rain cloud, above the well do you hover?

My quiet mother weeps for everyone.

Round star, you wind the golden loop.

My mother's heart was ripped by lead.

Oaken door, who lifted you off your hinges?

My gentle mother cannot return.

*

That night at my hotel in Berlin, I dream I'm an astronaut in outer space. I read that in space, you age slower. Gravity is not pulling away at you: this is called time dilation. But simultaneously, without gravity, your muscles lose mass and atrophy. So at once, you are aging in opposite directions. Trauma is like that, both linear and non-linear.

*

Celan drowned himself in the Seine at the age of forty-nine, in Paris, where he lived with his wife, the artist Gisele LeStrange. Celan had suffered from psychotic episodes ever since the war, and his death is widely accepted as suicide, though his biographer John Felstiner describes the event in oddly neutral terms: "About 20 April 1970, around Passover, Celan went from the bridge into the Seine and, though a strong swimmer, drowned unobserved."

In his poem, "Ashglory," Celan writes: "I dug myself into you and into you... No one / bears witness for the / witness."

*

My favorite piece from the Margulies Collection is Kiefer's "Geheimnis der Farne" or "The Secret of the Ferns," which takes its name from a Paul Celan poem. The piece fills an entire room, and includes two concrete bunkers in the center, as well as over 48 paintings lining the

walls, each with dried ferns pressed into resin or thick layers of paint, words scrawled in white chalk above them.

Ferns have been on Earth for about 359 million years. A scientist in Leipzig was the first to suggest they regenerate through spores rather than seeds.

The Palm Beach Daily News notes: "In the wall text, Kiefer talks about the antiquity of ferns and the possibility that plants have memories. If this is so, he says, 'ferns may contain secret knowledge.'"

The Miami Herald observes that "looking closely at the paintings of dried ferns, one can see the sprouts of new life, like when weeds start to break through that crumbling concrete wall or street. The earth can still spring eternal."

In Mitte, art galleries populate each block. I duck into a courtyard at one point, following signs for a café. Birch trees are planted in small squares, rich and full and red with October. A sign pushed into the ground explains that the birch trees are part of a "living archive" created by the Polish artist Lukasz Surowiec. He transported the young saplings from the grounds of the former Auschwitz-Birkenau camp and replanted them here. In "Corona," Paul Celan writes, "In the mirror it's Sunday, / in dream there is room for sleeping/...we love each other like poppy and recollection/we sleep like wine in the conches, / like the sea in the moon's blood ray."

*

Poetry has the capacity to enact the non-linearity of trauma. I think often of Jericho Brown's poem "Duplex," in a form he invented, in which the first line and the last line of the poem mirror one another.

A poem is a gesture toward home.
It makes dark demands I call my own.

Memory makes demands darker than my own:

My last love drove a burgundy car.

My first love drove a burgundy car.

He was fast and awful, tall as my father.

Steadfast and awful, my tall father

Hit hard as a hailstorm. He'd leave marks.

Light rain hits easy but leaves its own mark

Like the sound of a mother weeping again.

Like the sound of my mother weeping again,

No sound beating ends where it began.

None of the beaten end up how we began.
A poem is a gesture toward home.

Jericho Brown explores multiple types of trauma in this poem: “My tall father / Hit hard as a hailstorm,” speaks to childhood abuse and also the second definition of trauma, “physical injury.” But there is also a quieter, pervasive form of grief playing out beneath the theatrics of the father’s abuse: “Light rain hits easy but leaves its own mark / Like the sound of a mother weeping again.” If the father’s anger is hail, the mother’s sorrow is light rain leaving “its own mark” on the son, who is, horribly, both victim and witness to the father’s abuse. “None of the beaten end up how we began.”

I love thinking of a poem, too, as “a gesture toward home” and certainly this is one lens through which to consider Celan’s work. In her essay “Disruptions, Hesitations, and Silences,” Louise Glück writes of elliptical, lyric poems: “Such works inevitably allude to larger contexts; they haunt because they are not whole, though wholeness is implied: another time, a world in which they were whole, or were to have been whole, is implied.”

*

I’ll switch gears today before closing to touch briefly on my own creative work. My first book, *Fieldglass*, won the Crab Orchard First Book Prize in 2019 and was published in 2021 by Southern Illinois University Press. My poems have been influenced by some of the themes discussed today, though are not necessarily in conversation with them directly. They do often function as a gesture toward home, as well as a study in grief.

I will close with two poems. The first poem I’ll read appeared in *AGNI* in 2020.

“Floating Kayak in a Storm”

The second poem I’ll read is from, *Fieldglass*, which won the Crab Orchard First Book Prize in 2019 and was published in 2021 by Southern Illinois University Press. This poem was written in response to the Jasper Johns exhibit at The Broad Museum in Los Angeles in 2018.

“The Gallery”

The Erlking

The living room lit up by the afternoon sun, my mother presented me with a faded yellow book, the selected verse of Goethe. A soft, Penguin Classic. She read to me a poem called the Erlking. I was a college student, with aspirations of an MFA. Beyond lace curtains, the driveway opened, but I could not see past the black gravel. Behind my mother, a fireplace, and on the other side of the wall, a thicket of thorns, then our neighbor's home.

The Erlking is a German Romantic poem, metered and rhymed in the ballad form, of a dark tone and abuse. Goethe published it in 1782. It would have been the kind of poem memorized and recited by secular German and Austrian schoolchildren, like my family, murdered in the Third Reich. Hitler invoked the greatness of Germany's cannon, and her past, to edify the necessity of Arian triumph and ethnic cleansing. Goethe's Erlking depicts a supernatural threat, appearing as greatness, leading to death.

I wrote this poem for Queen Mob's Teahouse Queer Translations issue and I placed it in my thesis of poems that portray the speaker molested at the hands of a next door neighbor boy.

My task was to queer the poem. I wrote:

The Erlking

—after Goethe

He promised me games in the ocean
and blue silk robes.
I hid my face. Mein Vater, mein Vater,

while you drove past blossoming
flowers along the road, willow
branches shaking in fog,

did you hear him whispering
into my ear? You whipped the horses.
The sky darkened over the distant town.

*Pretty boy, pretty boy,
my daughters will dance for you the nightly
dance, dance and sing you to sleep.*

He rode next to us and reached to touch
me under your arm.

Pressed against the seats, I began cursing:

Mein Vater, mein Vater, why didn't you
see them,
the Erlking's daughters?

They were not the willows shimmering gray.

I wrote this in the first person, without the ballad form, and I compressed *The Erlking's* length.

I located my own trauma in the German, not of the Final Solution, but of molestation. Isn't the supernatural force of *The Erlking* a representation of promise and seduction, of play and harm?

The poem is an expression of insidiousness, an insidiousness that would be reified—as trauma inevitably is—by an authoritarian regime.

To translate Goethe is to attempt to reinvigorate his poem's strangeness in English. I depict the "daughters" as seducing the speaker, too. They are weaponized by their father, the Erlking, against an exposed child.

The child, in my version, is of the first person, which makes their gender illegible, except for when the Erlking sings *pretty boy, pretty boy*, assigning gender in seduction.

Illegibility expressed by the poem is also manifest in fog, whispers, and the willows shimmering gray.

Abuse is legible, but illegible insofar as it carries a particular significance; like murder, it contains no moral. The darkness of this Romantic narrative, like in Grimms' Fairy Tales, is that the very gesture one wishes to see—a parable—is absent. No message. Instead, cruelty. And, in cruelty, actually, humor, typical of this period. In the dark humor of cruelty, no underlying seriousness of dependable meaning. What can trauma mean except for absence within oneself? Illegibility. Distortion.

Upon returning to the text again, I noticed what I failed to remember about it, that under the poem, at the bottom of the page, an English prose translation appears.

The prose translation, done by David Luke, preserves the mother figure of the poem, who the Erlking alludes to when he says:

*'You sweet child, come, come with me! We shall play lovely games together, there are flowers of many colors
by the water's edge, my mother has many garments of gold.'*

The Erlking is an elfin king or The Alder King. That the Erlking alludes to his mother indicates his own relative young age and, with her golden robes for them, his diminutive size.

The leaves of the poem, also preserved by David Luke, suggest The Black Forest, raced through for the father to his child, home of the Erlking, invaded by the Allies in their race to Berlin.

In preserving the poem's third person narration, the child's death, at its end, is also preserved.

Shubert set the poem to song. And one finds the figure of the Alder King, from Scandinavian folklore, alluded to in Nabokov's creepy *Pale Fire* and, within the magical young adult world, as the Erlking in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and *The Goblet of Fire* video game.

*



Albert Sterner, 1910 (lithograph)

My mother and I discussed how Goethe's Romantic imagination was related to the very progressive
 Walter Reppel out of which I later rose. Perhaps Goethe was as easily remembered and
 thought of as the Romantic balladist Robert Burns is to Americans. To write *Abd Lang Syne*
 on New Year, not for us, to inject any significance beyond a song.

Sentimental words in their bestial order.

In a characteristic that would also be true of The Erlking, George Steiner wrote of Kafka that "he
 was able to approach the very act of speech from outside. Listening to the mystery of language with
 acute hearing, he heard the jargon of death growing loud inside the European tongue. Not in
 any vague allegoric sense, but with exact prophecy... The instrument of torture in The Penal Colony
 is also a painting press... parts of language would serve [a great instrument] and be made bare in the
 process..." (Steiner 50).

Everything exists, but not language. When it has been injected with falsehood, only the most drastic
 truth can cleanse it." (Steiner 108).



Moritz von Schwind, 1917, illustration for a postcard

My mother explicated the poem for me, having read it in German. She conveyed the wrought emotions of the artifice and my own experience, perhaps, given to me empathetically. I remember clearly her reading “the Erlking’s hurting me.”

My mother and I discussed how Goethe’s Romantic imagination was integral to the very progressive Weimer Republic, out of which Hitler rose. Perhaps Goethe was as easily remembered and unthought of as the Romantic balladeer Robbie Burns is to Americans. To recite Auld Lang Syne, on New Years, isn’t for us, to invoke any significance beyond a song.

Sentimental words in their heartfelt order.

In a characterization that would also be true of *The Erlking*, George Steiner wrote of Kafka that “[he] was able to approach the very act of speech from outside. Listening to the mystery of language with more acute humility...he heard the jargon of death growing loud inside the European vulgate. Not in any vague, allegoric sense, but with exact prophecy....The instrument of torture ‘In The Penal Colony’ is also a printing press....parts of language would serve [a great inhumanity] and be made base in the process...(Steiner 50).

Everything forgets. But not language. When it has been injected with falsehood, only the most drastic truth can cleanse it” (Steiner 108).

But, after trauma, how much can words represent, beyond “branches in fog” and vivid fragments?

To portray more would deplete the very power of suggestiveness that feels so threatening.

The very lack of physical force in language—its *aesthetic* power, its beauty—cleanses.

There is in the poem no fascism. And Goethe depicts no fondling, directly, but alludes to violence. The child speaks of it. It is in nature. The supernatural. When my mother was a girl, she was warned, by her Austrian mother, never to go in the woods.

But, as Goethe shows, the woods are what we ride through when we’re held safe.

F**gots

He pushed me into the needles
told me: shut up—

play the girl. Pretend
you have a secret and unzip my jeans.

I hated the clean smell of his skin
and the Japanese barberry.

At ten I said no—
but he jerked me into the pricklers.

He threw hard, spinning
the red stitches off his knuckles

and sending the ball over my head
to grab from the thicket lining the front

of his home. Now, from a window
overlooking his driveway, I watch him

slapping a ball against his garage,
shirtless, cracking

his knuckles. The first hands
of women stung like his hands stung.

I brushed them away
from the belt of my jeans.

Lying in Bed

falling asleep, I feel
the harshness of boyhood
return again; ripped
knees and skinned elbows;
owning the roughness within me;
isn't that what I disown and suppress?
or is that what others constantly see?
This is no performance: wreck
and tumble, the hat turned backward
or pulled down over my eyes; thickness
of my walk, shape of my ass and legs.
Soft skin of my hands. My full lips.

My love of poetry. How can anyone
fully feel the abandon of childhood
again when it comes back as hurt
and anger, filling my chest and abdomen
like a cement mixer pouring its wet
concrete into a hole. The power lines
were the upper deck of a stadium
and the back strip of brush beyond
the driveway across the yard
was the first rows of the crowd. Hard
to accept that the center of violence
in America is as mundane as a game.
Almost a Victorian sport. Slow and
persistent. As if impossible to erase
or chalk of tobacco stuffed in a cheek
and juicing.

As long as the Andes mountain
range. As mystic as Aztec pyramids.
Little did I know the moment I crouched
down would never be returned to except
as the tectonic shift and rising wave
below me. Like an emblazed
marble statue, roped off, the summer
punished us with heat and sequestered
itself. I would never have known that
in those afternoons of joy
there was an explosion of sound
that I would not hear again until now,
reverberating like a cuckoo
clock, madly in the kitchen.

When I was called home to the dinner
 table, I couldn't stop cursing.
 Who was keeping score. Words felt good
 to try. Didn't each game feel good to try?
 Why would a child return to a man who
 is trying to sleep, if all the child wants
 is to play again.

Lying in Bed

My face of being. How can anyone
 fully feel the abandon of childhood
 again when it comes back as pain
 and anger filling my chest and abdomen
 like a certain infant pouring its way
 concrete into a hole. The power lines
 were the upper deck of a cathedral
 and the back strip of brush beyond
 the driveway across the yard
 was the first row of the crowd. I had
 to accept that the error of evidence
 in Atlanta is as mundane as a game
 almost a Victorian sport show and
 persistent. As it is possible to cross
 or chalk of tobacco smudged in a chair
 and justice

As long as the Andes mountain
 range. As night as dark grounds.
 Lines and I know the moment I crossed
 down would never be returned to except
 as the brown shift and thing were
 below me. Like an embossed
 music state, roped off the summer
 parked or with been and requested
 itself. I would never have known that
 in those moments of joy
 there was an explosion of sound
 that I would not hear again and now
 reverberating like a carbon
 clock, trully in the kitchen