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August in translation

Abstract:

“August in Translation” investigates the ethics of engagement with poetry written after mass social trauma (Witness Poetry), and the possible ways of imagining a creative methodology for compassionate relationship through translation and response poetry. As a first step in compassionate engagement, I use translation of the Witness Poem; both an act of “love” [1] and a “risk, a transgression” [2]. I then write response poetry, after translation, opening further reflection and creative exploration, illuminating the anxieties, ambiguities and “transgressions” within the position of witness to Witness. Compassion, as a framework for ethical engagement, relies on an acknowledgement of distance [3], of being on the fringes of another’s trauma, and endlessly reaching toward an unreachable other [4].

These poems are a case-study of this methodology, a tool for opening the response to the original Witness Poem, coming to terms with the risk of translation and feeling through my own position of being-on-the-fringe to another’s poetic testimony. This project focuses on the reading, translation and response to “August” by Sarah Kirsch [5]. My translation is not meant to offer a final version of this German Witness Poem, rather I intend to offer an opening towards the original poem, as the impossibility of translation resists closure and maintains ongoing relationship. The “response poems” are a working-through of positionality relating to poetic testimony to trauma, acting as artefacts mapping my personal response and methodological troubles/thinking/questioning of engagement, opened by the initial, unfinishable act of translation.

Biographical note:

After graduating from the University of Western Australia with first class honours, Caitlyn Stone moved to Vienna to study a Master of Arts in Applied Human Rights. Here, her interests in poetic testimony and methodologies for compassionate engagement are being explored in an interdisciplinary, artistic and practice-as-research setting. Caitlyn’s lyrical works have been commissioned by numerous award-winning

West Australian composers, and she has taken part in a number of collaborative artistic projects and performances, both in Perth and Vienna. She has recently had academic work published in *Axon: Creative Explorations*.

August

Sarah Kirsch

Ich trage Sehnsucht

Warm wie Wolle

Der Schafe. Der Wind

Vom Meer bringt Schnee

August

In Translation

I wear Yearning

Warm as Sheep's

Wool. The Wind

From the Sea brings Snow

Would you believe me if I told you

I met a woman on the pier or
I imagined I did. The sort of

woman, who
I love on cue,

(is this presumptuous?)
woman, with open oval face,

bringing intimacy. You talk
of nothing big or new. Now

shockingly near.
Confident as water.

humming the feeling this wasn't
insignificant. Though we talked

In small pieces the way old
friends do, like worn fleeces,

black or blue I held the weight
immense, running under. For days

I kept thinking of her
waves black and blue.

In my mind the sea was her

making small sounds and longing always

always longing
longing

always

(see how I love her, I promise I do, comparing her to water, lapping always longing)

The briefest history of snow

By the lake, the Bodensee,
(Lake Constance, to you and me),
Winter is a grey mist spreading out,
making the mirror of water dirty, opaque—
it is about this time that
farewells begin. They creep, hushed by new snow.
The traffic stops for three days.
I walk, knee-high unhurried,
past the Old Town, through the new
over the overpass (no traffic going through)
I don't think I passed a single open eye.

A woman with a headscarf, sitting with a child on her knee,
I knew her from somewhere—ah!
I had sat beside in the dank 'community centre'
learning German in the Summer months.
She had brought syrupy sweets, a Turkish treat,
and shared them out, laughing, because we shared no language.
I pass her, but she does not smile. Eyes closed, she hums.
Rocks the child who sucks his thumb.
We are the same age, I think.
Besides the woman—I shake my brain for her name but it has been
replaced with *Schnee*, *Ingwer*, *Lebensende*, magic words that leave her
no space— besides that woman, I pass only strangers,
especially strange because there has been no traffic for three
days the snow is too high, orange trucks, rollers, mumble,
inching by I walk over the tram line (no trams either),
the lakeside is emptied, a cup overturned.
On clear days, in the Summer months,
you can see the houses on Lindau,
across blue blue water,
shimmering beside Rapunzel's tower.
But today it is only grey, a wall a thousand miles
high, pressing down like a tongue on a stamp.
Wet mouth of Winter sealing—

Notes

[1] Please see Spivak, G. Ch. (2000). The politics of translation. In L. Venuti (Ed.), *The translation studies reader* (p. 181). Routledge.

[2] Please see Bhattacharjee, T. (2023). The tragic in translation: Spivakian planetarity and a new ethics of reading. *Journal of Comparative Literature & Aesthetics*, 46(2), 79.

[3] Please see Tracy, D. (2017). *With the witnesses: Poetry, compassion, and claimed experience*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

[4] Please see Spivak, G. Ch. (2000).

[5] Please see Kirsch, S. (2004). "August". In E. Boland (Ed.) *After every war: Twentieth-Century women poets*. Princeton University Press