



The Stephen Spender Prize 2015  
in association with **theguardian**

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for poetry in translation



# The Stephen Spender Prize 2015 for poetry in translation

in association with **theguardian**

## Joint winners of the 14-and-under category



**Viktoria Mileva**  
'Farewell'  
by Nikola Vaptsarov  
(Bulgarian)



**Euan Ong**  
'In Circulation'  
by Alain Bosquet  
(French)

## Winners of the 18-and-under category



**Joint first**  
**Beatrix Crinnion**  
'Allegro'  
by Tomas Tranströmer  
(Swedish)



**Joint first**  
**Anna Leader**  
'Weeds'  
by Jan Wagner  
(German)



**Third**  
**Maud Mullan**  
'A Lament at the Door'  
by Callimachus  
(Ancient Greek)

## Winners of the Open category

No first prize is  
awarded in the  
Open category  
this year



**Second**  
**Francisca Gale**  
'Long-Distance  
Conversation'  
by Anestis Evangelou  
(Greek)



**Third**  
**Martin Bennett**  
'Acherontia Atropos'  
by Guido Gozzano  
(Italian)

## Commended

### 14-and-under commended

**Thomas Delgado-Little**  
'The Victims Won't Speak'  
by Carmen Conde (Spanish)

**Anissa Felah**  
'The Cicada and the Ant'  
by Jean de la Fontaine (French)

**Victoria Fletcher**  
'The Song about the End of the World'  
by Czesław Miłosz (Polish)

**Grace Guthrie**  
'Birthday' by Sulpicia (Latin)

### 18-and-under commended

**Sarah Hudis**  
'Writing in the Sand'  
by Iwan Llwyd (Welsh)

**Anna Leader**  
'Hamburg-Berlin'  
by Jan Wagner (German)

**Euan McGinty**  
'Strong in the Rain'  
by Miyazawa Kenji (Japanese)

**Alexandra Seizani-Dimitriadi**  
'The Monogram'  
by Odysseus Elytis (Greek)

**Chloe Taylor**  
'Despair Is Seated on a Bench'  
by Jacques Prévert (French)

### Open commended

**Ken Cockburn**  
'Search'  
by Christine Marendon (German)

**Michaela Pschierer-Barnfather**  
'Title Colon Dictation'  
by Michael Schönen (German)

**Anne Stokes**  
'Peonies at Pentecost'  
by Monika Rinck (German)

**Michael Swan**  
'A Dream about My Mother'  
by Henrik Nordbrandt (Danish)

Collectors of statistics will be glad to know that in 2015 we received more entries than ever before but from a mere 46 languages, well short of the 53 recorded in 2013. Although there were some languages new to the competition – including Friulian (sometimes known as eastern Ladin), Frisian and Maltese – French dominated as usual, and German continued to hold its own against Spanish and Italian. There was a small surge in Greek and Ukrainian entries; one imagines translators from those languages turning to poetry to escape the horrors carried by the newspapers.

The Stephen Spender Trust did its bit to cheer people up in early March, celebrating slightly tardily the tenth anniversary of the prize in the splendour of the Royal Institution, an evening made possible by the generosity of the Old Possum's Practical Trust. The programme featured 26 winning translations of poems from Anglo-Saxon, Bengali, Finnish, French, Ancient Greek, Irish, Italian, German, Japanese, Latin, Old English, Romanian, Russian, Spanish and Welsh, introduced by Seamus Heaney's beautiful 'From the Republic of Conscience' in recognition of his support of the Trust until his death in 2013, and rounded off by Stephen Spender's joyful 'Dolphins'. Noma Dumezweni, Patricia Hodge and Michael Pennington, directed by Joe Harmsworth, brought a new depth of meaning to the poems, providing a master class in reading poetry aloud. If you weren't able to be there, do listen to the readings on the Trust's website.

There is room in this booklet to print only the winning entries, but you can read the commended entries and download previous booklets by visiting [stephen-spender.org](http://stephen-spender.org). Also on the website are some examples of activities involving poetry translation, not all from taught languages; if you are unfamiliar with isiNdebele praise poetry, have a look. We will continue to build up this resource and I am excited to be working on this with a poet-in-residence whose young EAL (English as an Additional Language) pupils took to poetry translation so enthusiastically that one has been voted joint winner of the 14-and-under category.

As well as recording the Trust's heartfelt gratitude to the prize's sponsors, the Old Possum's Practical Trust and the Dr Mortimer and Theresa Sackler Foundation, to the Guardian, and to Josephine Balmer, Katie Gramich, WN Herbert and Stephen Romer, this year's wonderfully wise and conscientious judges, I'm delighted to announce that 2016 will be a landmark year. After much debate and with some trepidation, we have decided to take the step of making the prize worldwide. We have long been aware of the irony of inviting translations from any language but restricting entry to British and Irish translators. From 2016 everyone will be eligible to enter.

*Robina Pelham Burn*  
*Director of the Stephen Spender Trust*

## Judges' comments



If there was ever any doubt that poetry matters then the entries to the 2105 Stephen Spender Prize have dispelled it. As in previous years, many entrants submitted translations of poems that held a deep resonance for them. Yet perhaps more noticeable, even among our younger entrants, were the translations that showed us how poetry can respond to worldwide conflict and tragedy, if the most moving – and successful – of these combined the political with the personal. Thirteen-year-old Thomas Delgado-Little, for example, commended for his translation of Carmen Conde's Spanish Civil War poem 'The Victims Won't Speak', recounted how his own great-grandfather had died for the Republican cause. In the Open category, I was also moved by Clare Pollard's heart-stopping 'The Last Poem

of Rabia Balkhi', Malene Engelund's delicate rendering of second World War Danish poet Morten Nielsen, Cristina Viti's lyrical account of oppression in communist Albania from Gëzim Hajdari, and Pavlo Shopin's timely 'You and I Are Refugees' from Ukrainian poet Serhiy Zhadan.

As in previous years, our Open prize-winners introduced us to wonderful new poetry – the true gift of translation – from Francisca Gale's compact but perfectly-formed 'Long-Distance Conversation' by Greek poet Anestis Evangelou to Martin Bennett's extract from Guido Gozzano's overlooked fragmentary Italian epic.

This trend for contemporary poetry was particularly noticeable in our two younger categories where classical works have long been dominant. In the 14-and-under category, we were impressed by two young Bulgarian translators, Teodor Egriderliev and

Viktoria Mileva, with the latter just nudging ahead for the prize which she shared with Euan Ong's inventive version of French poet Alain Bosquet. That said, there were some excellent Greek and Latin entries from unusual poets such as Sulpicia, amusingly reimaged by Grace Guthrie. And in the 18-and-under category, Maud Mullan's drawing out of an epigram by Callimachus just edged her two versions of Horace. But, again, our joint first prize winners, Beatrix Crinnion and Anna Leader, translated contemporary languages, Tomas Tranströmer's Swedish and Jan Wagner's German respectively. Meanwhile, our list of commendations included Japanese, Greek and Welsh, all beautifully translated by Euan McGinty, Alexandra Seizani-Dimitriadi and Sarah Hudis. A personal favourite which did not quite make the final cut was Helen Chen's 'Charon' from Chinese poet Bei Xiao Huang, bringing us in to the 21st

century by contemplating the powers of Google.

Poems about translation itself were a common theme this year, many reflecting the prisms of layering language on language. Of these I was most entranced by Edward Clarke's version of Nicola Gardini's beautiful 'Emily in Mondello' in which the Italian poet muses on his own engagement with Emily Dickinson. On the minus side, there also appeared to be a marked increase in the use of Google Translate. But most of all, it was lovely to see our entrants having fun with rhyme and word play, from Michaela Pschierer-Barnfather's 'Title Colon Dictation' in the Open competition to eight-year-old Anissa Felah's 'The Cicada and the Ant'. I thank them all for brightening these particularly gloomy summer days this year with their invention – and enthusiasm

*Josephine Balmer*



This was my first year as judge for the Stephen Spender poetry translation prize. I was excited at the prospect and somewhat overwhelmed

by the reality. I certainly wasn't expecting a total of 586 translations, of such extraordinary variety, from no fewer than 46 languages.

Sadly, there was only one translation from my own mother tongue, Welsh, though this was a very good version by Sarah Hudis of part of a poem by Iwan Llwyd, 'Sgriften yn y Tywod' ('Writing in the Sand'). If only Sarah had attempted the whole 32-line poem, rather than just three quatrains. I hope there will be many more Welsh entries next year – come on, Cymry!

French, German, Latin, Spanish, Russian and Italian were well represented across all three categories. I was particularly impressed by the high quality of the German and Latin entries. It was also thrilling to discover work in languages of which I have no knowledge, like Bulgarian and Chinese. Such discoveries are of course the *raison d'être* of the Stephen Spender competition: translation opens the door to another culture, another world.

I also learned a great deal from the translators' commentaries, which ranged from the perfunctory to the profound. One entrant rather too candidly declared that 'The original did not rhyme, which meant one less thing to worry about', while another, Anna Leader, astutely observed of her translation of Gaston Miron's 'Poème de séparation' that 'The difficulty of translating this poem was resisting the urge to "explain" it.'

Not all the translations managed to become poems in English. There were some which remained stubbornly prosaic, often those by translators locked in a lethally close embrace with their originals. In the younger age category there were sometimes problems with register, especially in the commentaries. Future entrants might profit from avoiding the hideous word 'relatable' and might also bear in mind the *literary* nature of the competition: there's nothing wrong with translating a French rap song, but judges are not really impressed by how many views the rapper's video has had on YouTube!

Yet the quality of the original poem is important. A thin original is unlikely to produce a brilliant translation. This explains why a number of entrants attempted new versions of classic texts. I particularly enjoyed eight-year-old Anissa Felah's translation of La Fontaine's 'La Cigale et la Fourmi', which showed an impressive command of rhyme and rhythm: 'I promise with my insect heart / To pay you back when Harvest starts'. There were also inventive and thoughtful renditions of works by Rilke, Leopardi, Dante, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and others, including a striking version of Goethe's 'Erlkönig' by Adrian Dobson called 'The Boggart', in which Goethe's horseman is transformed into a northern motorcyclist pursued by a malevolent goblin straight off the moors of *Jane Eyre*. However, such classic texts provide particular challenges, not just in their inherent richness but also in the daunting fact that so many great translators have attempted the task before.

Many of the winning and commended entries are translations of

works by contemporary poets I had not previously read, including Monika Rinck and Christine Marendon, each of whom has a distinctive voice and style, captured with a deft and sensitive touch by their respective translators, Anne Stokes and Ken Cockburn.

At the end of the process, and the lively and enlightening discussion with my fellow judges, I am left with unforgettable lines of poetry echoing through my head: 'weeds always sneak back like old guilt' (Jan Wagner, translated by Anna Leader); 'Let the wind howl, let the wind swither / Someone shall be Agamemnon, somebody his killer' (Odysseus Elytis, translated by Alasdair Gordon); 'Another sentence. Tears are quick to come / To one already set far apart, / As if pain on pain had stripped life from her heart' (Anna Akhmatova, translated by Miriam Ettrick).

Next year, I will have a better idea of what to expect, namely, a box full of unexpected and delightful discoveries.

*Katie Gramich*



The two younger categories this year were full of fresh takes on how to convey what poetry means to a particular culture. The

14-and-under winner, Viktoria Mileva, expressed the eerie sense of presence in Vaptsarov's poem on the eve of execution by the repetitive use of the future tense – the one tense about to be denied him. I also liked how Chrysostomos Kamaris drew out an ambivalence from Ioannides' lullaby, in which Saint Marina is exhorted to take the baby away, 'Then when it is older, bring it back.'

One translator in the 18-and-under category, Mundie Lawrance, found two very different ways to bring the translation to life: the performative finger click in Vysotsky's 'Singer at the Microphone', and the use of a landscape orientation in Bo Bergman's 'We Whispering Wings in the Night'. It was exciting to see last year's winning subject, Jan Wagner, being conveyed so ably by Anna Leader. I particularly admired Beatrix Crinnion's take on Transtömer's 'Allegro' because, like

these other younger translators, she combined strong decisions about form and layout with precision of tone.

In the adult category, I admired several recurrent sub-categories of translation. One was the difficult comic rhyming poem – often dismissed, although the necessity to marry rhyme and lightness of tone make it the trickiest of modes. I liked the dexterity of Caroline New's translation of Giusti's 'The Snail', and thought that successfully incorporating the words for punctuation terms into nimble couplets, as Michaela Pschierer-Barnfather did with Michael Schönen's 'Title Colon Dictation', required real brio.

The second such category was Classical elegy. I was impressed by the pared down elegance of Duncan Forbes's Martial translation, which made me think again about that poet, while Arabella Currie's 'Piso for God' (Philippus of Thessalonica) seemed to demand inscription on the nearest piece of marble.

The winning poems, and those that approached that status, did several things well. One was to handle narrative – or rather that air of story, usually *in media res*, that is all the poem requires. Families or individuals half-knowing they are on the cusp of change feature in Richard Gwyn's fine 'Winter Poem' (by Jorge Teillier), and are the subjects of a visitation in Martin Bennett's version of Gozzano's 'Acherontia Atropos', where the ominous moth, flapping and tapping on the glass, acquires an almost Nabokovian edge.

I was especially moved by poems where that cusp has passed: Nordbrandt's 'A Dream about My Mother', translated by Michael Swan, uses the poignant discontinuities of dream to convey the continuing presence of the dead. 'Long-Distance Conversation', by Anestis Evangelou, is brilliantly handled by Francisca Gale, who has to use the plainest language to convey a conversation between father and adult child, and expresses the revelation that the distance referred to is death – withheld till the last line – with devastating restraint.

WN Herbert



My first impression, this year as last, on surveying the 586 translations submitted for the prize, was of variety. And there were some unusual languages: Bulgarian, Portuguese, Turkish, Chinese, Anglo-Saxon, Welsh; and in the Open category, Arabic, Kurdish, Japanese, and Tagalog. I was frequently moved by the quality and personal nature of the commentaries, especially among the younger translators, several of whom, when not native-speakers of English, were anxious to showcase famous poems from their own countries. This was the case with our joint winner in the 14-and-under category, Viktoria Mileva, who translated the short, poignant poem 'Farewell' by the Bulgarian poet Nikola Vaptsarov, shot by the Nazis. The commentary, personal and informative, was a model of its kind, setting the two quatrains in context. Among the commended I especially liked Grace Guthrie's 'creative translation' (her description) of Sulpicia's 'Birthday', put into the voice of a 'bratty teenager' who may be a younger Bridget Jones. Among those that didn't quite make the final cut, I would commend Cath Churchill's Ovid, Kajal Patel's Rimbaud, and Gwen Choi's Brecht.

The 14-and-under category also contained several versions of French rap songs by Stromae, MC Solaar and others. A word of warning: these versions failed to satisfy the judges because rap is emphatically not just rhythm-based but also *rhyme*-based – the end-rhyme is the lynch pin, and the English versions failed to reproduce this.

In the 18-and-under category, German came through strongly, notably in the two translations from the contemporary Jan Wagner, who invests humble phenomena or small events with sensuous linguistic and metaphysical charge. Anna Leader's rendering of 'Weeds' relishes the consonantal German and matches it. Joint first was Beatrix Crinnion's version of Tomas Tranströmer's homage to Haydn, 'Allegro'. Crinnion explained in her commentary that she

had only recently set out to study Swedish on her own. Maud Mullan's elegant Callimachus ('A Lament at the Door'), with a commentary referring learnedly to Greek rhetorical terms, came third. Among the commended, my favourite was Chloe Taylor's Prévert ('Despair Is Seated on a Bench'); her decision to break the French up into stanzas, each one representing a kind of photographic still in an unfolding cinematic narrative, was convincing. I should also like to mention here Violet Smart's Octavio Paz, Euan McGinty's Miyazawa and Abe Chauhan's Kästner.

In the Open category Francisca Gale's 'Long-Distance Conversation' by Anestis Evangelou delicately conveyed the touching original Greek and the rueful surprise at the end. Martin Bennett's fine version of Guido Gozzano's 'Acherontia Atropos' is an example of what the Spender Prize can do best – encourage ambitious attempts to revive in translation complex work by poets too liable to be airbrushed out by fashion or sheer laziness. Three more powerful contemporary German poets we commended are Christine Marendon, Michael Schönen and Monika Rinck, translated by Ken Cockburn, Michaela Pschierer-Barnfather and Anne Stokes respectively.

My personal commendations include Clare Pollard's powerfully topical 'The Last Poem of Rabia Balkhi', Elizabeth Howard-Ahern's Old English and James Ackhurst's richly orchestrated Neruda. Richard Gwyn's versions of the contemporary Columbian Darío Jaramillo Agudelo I found compelling. I commend Olivia McCannon for her passionate Louise Labé, Kevin Maynard for his haunting Góngora (both versions), David McCallam for his Chénier, Peter Jackson for his Vigny, Caroline New for her Giuseppe Giusti, and Olwyn Grimshaw for her short fragment of Ovid, traditionally done, word-perfect, lovely to read.

Stephen Romer

Прощално

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*На жена ми*

Понякога ще идвам във съня ти  
като нечакан и неискан гостенин.  
Не ме оставяй ти навън на пътя–  
вратите не залоствай.

Ще влезна тихо. Кротко ще приседна,  
ще вперя поглед в мрака да те видя.  
Когато се наситя да те гледам–  
ще те целуна и ще си отида.

*Никола Вапцаров (Nikola Vaptsarov)*

Farewell

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*To my wife*

Sometimes I will come into your dreams,  
an unexpected and unwelcome guest.  
Do not leave me outside –  
doors bolted.

I will come in silently. I will sit quietly,  
I will stare into the darkness to see you.  
When I have seen you enough,  
I will kiss you and go.

*Translated from the Bulgarian  
by Viktoria Mileva*

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Viktoria Mileva's commentary

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I was looking for a Bulgarian poem to translate, so I asked my mother. Actually my grandmother suggested this poem by Nikola Vaptsarov. He is an important poet in Bulgaria even though he only ever wrote one book of poetry in his lifetime. He died when he was only 32. At first I did not really understand everything about the poem but after I read it again and again I began to like it very much.

I think the poet wrote the poem because he knew he was going to die. He was arrested during WWII for being a communist and

acting against the government and the German troops in Bulgaria. On the same day he was arrested, 23 July 1942, he was sentenced to death. He wrote this poem to his wife at 2pm that afternoon. In the evening he was shot and killed. It is a note to let his wife know he is going to die but it is also a love letter. I think this is an important poem for people to know outside Bulgaria – it is going to help them to understand things about the war and how deeply the Bulgarian people feel for their dead. When my grandma Marinka died I was so sad.

The poem is a nice shape in Bulgarian and I wanted to keep the same shape, as much as possible, in English. The language is simple. I like the first two lines which give the impression of a ghost coming and the end which shows that even when you are dead, love does not leave you.

I came to the UK from Bulgaria a year ago on 19 July 2014. I spoke only a little bit of English then but now I am already forgetting some Bulgarian words and I like to write my poetry in English.

Pages Volantes

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La poussière jamais ne couvrira ces pages.  
Que je sois vif ou mort,  
un vent viendra les agiter  
et, s'il le faut, elles s'envoleront  
par-dessus la montagne,  
pour se poser chez quelque peuple migrateur.  
Un prince, un voleur de chevaux  
les cueilleront comme des nénuphars,  
puis un prophète ordonnera qu'on les traduise.  
Elles prendront un sens nouveau,  
et les enfants parmi les pierres pâliront  
de les comprendre,  
ou de les déformer pour qu'elles rajeunissent,  
plus blanches,  
plus pures  
et plus impitoyables

*Alain Bosquet*

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In Circulation

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Dust will never cover these pages.  
Whether I will live or die,  
a wind will stir them, and,  
if the world needs new meaning,  
it will take them  
over the mountains  
past endless sands  
perhaps to settle among  
the foothills of confusion.  
Maybe a prince,  
maybe a horse-thief  
may pluck them like water-lilies.  
Maybe they may balk  
At the scratches upon them.  
Maybe a prophet might order their translation.  
Then the scratches will be words,  
then the words can be reborn,  
with new life, with new sense;  
Even the children who play amongst the rocks  
will pale with new understanding,  
or even twist the words themselves so  
the pages themselves will be renewed,  
so white,  
so pure  
so cruel  
and now no longer mine.

*Translated from the French  
by Euan Ong*

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Euan Ong's commentary

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The process of translation is a challenge in itself – a fact I was deeply acquainted with when attempting to translate 'Pages Volantes'. I had studied this poem before and enjoyed its message about the difficulties of translation, leading me to choose it to translate. I had to make a radical title change – a literal translation of 'Pages Volantes' seemed a little awkward. I believe that the point of the poem is not just about the pages 'flying' but actually ideas being transferred from culture to culture, hence the title 'In Circulation'. I hint at the concept of theft ('volantes') in the last two lines. The final

line of the poem is 'et plus impitoyables', conveying a sense that the words are merciless to the author. I interpreted this as the author regretting that if another culture translates his work, the process will be cruel (it will not have the depth of the original), and yet it can no longer be said that the translations belong to the author. I felt this point needed an extra line to explain.

The 'peuple migrateur' would probably refer to some non-European people. This tribe will almost definitely use a non-Latin script (for them, our alphabet will be 'script unknown'), and the 'prophet' suggests

religion. Perhaps the pages are religious texts? I hinted at religion with vocabulary such as 'reborn'.

I, personally, believe translation is your best attempt at bringing the ideas of one language into the culture of another: language embodies the culture of the nation who speaks it. For me, with little experience in translation, it seems fitting to translate this poem about translation and the hardships endured – you are writing your experience of translating the experiences of translation – and in doing so giving the world new meaning.

## Joint first prize, 18-and-under category

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### Allegro

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Jag spelar Haydn efter en svart dag  
och känner en enkel värme i händerna.

Tangenterna vill. Milda hammare slår.  
Klangen är grön, livlig och stilla.

Klangen säger att friheten finns  
och att någon inte ger kejsaren skatt.

Jag kör ner händerna i mina haydnfickor  
och härmar en som ser lugnt på världen.

Jag hissar haydnflaggan – det betyder:  
»Vi ger oss inte. Men vill fred. «

Musiken är ett glashus på slutningen  
där stenarna flyger, stenarna rullar.

Och stenarna rullar tvärs igenom  
men varje ruta förblir hel.

*Tomas Tranströmer*

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of Monica Tranströmer

### Allegro

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After a dark day,  
I sit down to play Haydn  
and the simple heat of my hands warms the gloom away.  
The keys are ready. The gentle hammers beat.  
The melody is green, vibrant, serene.  
The melody says that freedom exists  
and that there is one who doesn't render unto Caesar.  
I shuffle along, hands in my Haydnpockets.  
Nonchalant.  
I hoist my Haydnflag to declare our message:  
'We do not back down. But we strive for peace.'  
The music is a house of glass on the hillside.  
There stones fly and there stones roll.  
Roll straight through.  
But each pane remains  
Unbroken.

*Translated from the Swedish  
by Beatrix Crinnion*

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## Beatrix Crinnion's commentary

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The opportunity to enter the Stephen Spender competition arose not long after I had begun to teach myself Swedish, and I thought that having a go at it would be a fun way to discover more about the Swedes, their country and their language. While I do tend to use music to learn more vocabulary, reading and translating foreign poetry was something which I had not yet considered. So I started, as a beginner, simply: searching Swedish poetry on Google.

One of the poets who stood out to me most was Tomas Tranströmer; he has been praised for being such an accessible

and influential poet and even won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2011. It is not difficult to understand why. The Swedish he uses is not particularly extravagant or elaborate, and yet his poems create very intricate and pure images. Tranströmer, who died in March this year, is one of the most translated Scandinavian poets of his time – his poems have been translated into more than sixty languages – and arguably the most celebrated too. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, I wanted to try to give the same image and fluency without being too wordy.

There were several challenges in this poem, one being the line 'och härmar en som ser lugnt på världen'. I eventually opted for just the one word 'nonchalant', as not only was it short and precise, it gave the calm and detached sense that would otherwise feel quite clunky in the English. The choice to make the poem one stanza instead of couplets came naturally while translating. I felt that it made the poem mirror the peace and serenity of the music, but without losing its structure as it still had the one-word lines 'nonchalant' and 'unbroken' which framed the two themes of the music (ie the music versus the metaphor).

## Joint first prize, 18-and-under category

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### Giersch

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nicht zu unterschätzen: der giersch  
mit dem begehren schon im namen – darum  
die blüten, die so schwebend weiß sind, keusch  
wie ein tyrannentraum.

kehrt stets zurück wie eine alte schuld,  
schickt seine kassiber  
durchs dunkel unterm rasen, unterm feld,  
bis irgendwo erneut ein weißes wider-

standsnest emporschießt. hinter der garage,  
beim knirschenden kies, der kirsche: giersch  
als schäumen, als gischt, der ohne ein geräusch

geschieht, bis hoch zum giebel kriecht, bis giersch schier  
überall sprießt, im ganzen garten giersch  
sich über giersch schiebt, ihn verschlingt mit nichts als giersch.

*Jan Wagner*

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### Weeds

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not to be underestimated: weeds,  
their syllable full of greed – this is why  
they bloom so hoveringly white, chaste  
as a tyrant's dream.

weeds always sneak back like old guilt  
to send secret messages  
through the dark, under lawns and fields  
to someplace where a white resistance-

nest is festering. behind the garage,  
by the crunching gravel and under the cherry tree: weed  
as choking froth, as foam, that germinates

soundlessly and creeps up the gable, until it grows almost  
everywhere, in the whole garden weeds  
slice into weeds, twisting with and swallowing nothing  
but weeds.

*Translated from the German  
by Anna Leader*

Translator's note: 'Giersch' is *Aegopodium podagraria*  
(ground elder), a highly invasive weed with white flowers.

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### Anna Leader's commentary

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Jan Wagner's work really appeals to me because of the strikingly original and sometimes unsettling images that he includes in his poems: 'Giersch' reads like a nightmare that you can't wake up from. The best thing about this poem, apart from the imagery, is its sounds – the last stanza especially is so full of the 'sch' sound

that it becomes suffocating, just like the weed-choked garden that it is describing. Preserving this was the most difficult part of translating this text, and I tried to use 's' and 'ch' sounds to produce the same sonic effect. The whole poem plays off the pun between 'Giersch', an invasive weed, and 'Gier', the word for greed or desire. This

wordplay would have rendered the first stanza untranslatable but for the lucky fact that 'greed' and 'weed' rhyme. The original poem invites the reader to return to it over and over again, and to read it out loud – my hope is that the reader of my translation is deeply disturbed, and cannot look at their garden again in the same way.

AP v23

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οὕτως ὑπνώσαις, Κωνώπιον, ὡς ἐμὲ ποιεῖς  
κοιμᾶσθαι ψυχροῖς τοῖσδε παρὰ προθύροις,  
οὕτως ὑπνώσαις, ἀδικωτάτη, ὡς τὸν ἔραστήν  
κοιμίζεις, ἐλέου δ' οὐδ' ὄναρ ἠντίασας.  
γείτονες οἰκτεῖρουσι, σὺ δ' οὐδ' ὄναρ. ἢ πολλὴ δὲ  
αὐτίκ' ἀναμνήσει ταῦτά σε πάντα κόμη.

*Callimachus*

Epigram 64: A Lament at the Door (AP v23)

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Sleep like this  
In the ice bath of evening,  
Head heavy on the hard porch  
Where you have left me.  
I curse you, sweet lover, I curse  
You, lying in the shuttered house.  
Sleep like this! Nothing is crueller  
Than you. Live how you  
Have made me live.

Is forgiveness foreign to you?  
No dream of pity stirs  
Your hair in the darkness.  
The neighbours passing  
To and from their lamp-lit gardens  
Lower their eyes – oh such  
A miserable sight! No,  
Not even a dream disturbs you.

I sleep this way, the cold  
Like the flat of the steel blade  
On my cheek. I curse  
You with this.  
Suddenly, at your mirror  
You will pull white hairs  
From the polished brush.  
They will warn you  
Of all my pain.

*Translated from the Ancient Greek  
by Maud Mullan*

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**Maud Mullan's commentary**

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I started reading Callimachus in response to my Greek and Latin studies. He is one of the few Ancient Greek poets whose works survive in completed form and I was interested to see how his work had influenced the later Roman authors with whom I was more familiar. What could have been a dry afternoon in the library became an engrossing one once I discovered that much of Callimachus' extant work consists of epigrams – some pithy, some funny, others mournful, but all of them in beautifully constructed Greek, and, what's more, short enough for one to translate in one sitting and have a complete result.

Greek holds most of its meaning in verbs, something often hard to convey in English, which is syntactically weak and relies on word order and a wide vocabulary to convey subtleties of meaning. Like Latin, techniques that Greek uses to influence meaning in poetry are hard to recreate in English. Emphatic word order is often impossible, and techniques such as repetition, polyptoton and alliteration, which Callimachus uses here to great effect, sound awkward and dull in English.

In translating Epigram 64, I found it difficult to convey the repeated phrases in English without it being clumsy, as well as

struggling with the subtleties of words that, by nature of an epigram, are minimalist, but need more expression to create the same sense in English. Therefore I ended up with a three-stanza poem – longer than the original, but, I hope, staying closer to the sense than I otherwise could have.

Callimachus' epigram is written in elegiac couplets, a quantitative verse form that does not lend itself to English. Therefore I have chosen instead to use free verse in three nine-line stanzas, focusing on conveying the sense of the poem rather than being constricted by metre.

Υπεραστική συνδιάλεξη

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Εχτές το βράδυ μου τηλεφώνησε  
ο πατέρας μου.

Στείλε μου μερικά  
πεννηταράκια ούζο, μου είπε,  
και καναδυό κούτες τσιγάρα  
σέρτικα, να κάθουμαι τα βράδια  
να σας συλλογιέμαι.

Και – να μην  
το ξεχάσω – και πεντέξι δίσκους  
φωναγράφου μ' εκείνα τα παλιά, ξέρεις,  
ποντιακά τραγούδια, τα λυπητερά.

Εδώ στα ξένα δύσκολα περνούν οι μέρες  
και που να βρεις τσιγάρα, ούζο και τραγούδια  
της πατρίδας, στα μαγαζάκια τ' ουρανού.

*Anestis Evangelou*

Long-Distance Conversation

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Last night my father  
called me.

Send me some bottles of ouzo,  
he told me, and one or two  
cartons of strong cigarettes,  
so I can sit of an evening and think of you all.

And – before I forget – five or six records  
with those old Pontic songs, you know,  
the sad ones.

Over here the days pass by so slowly,  
and where are you supposed to find  
cigarettes, ouzo, and songs from home,  
in the shops of heaven.

*Translated from the Greek  
by Francisca Gale*

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Francisca Gale's commentary

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I first came across this poem (which has not, as far as I know, been translated into English before) during a seminar on death in modern Greek literature. The reason for the poem's inclusion in such a course is not apparent at first; it's only in the final line of verse that it becomes clear that the father is not simply working abroad, but is in fact dead. The degree to which this comes as a surprise could have been heightened in my translation: the title of the poem could also be rendered 'long-distance phonecall', and the father could have 'phoned' the son. Instead I chose the more ambiguous 'conversation'

and 'called', so that the effect was not too jarring. In turn, it is worth noting that the word for heaven in Greek, ουρανός, is also used for the sky, so my choice of 'heaven' is a decision for less ambiguity in the final line.

What particularly attracted me to the poem is the father's voice – very informal and colloquial, somewhat reminiscent of the voices of *rebetika*, the Greek blues. This was, however, perhaps the most difficult aspect of the poem to represent in English. The distinct rhythm of the father's speech is created through the positioning of the lines within the stanzas of free verse, so I sought

to replicate this rhythm in the same way in English.

In many respects, the poem is distinctly Greek, and so sometimes it was not possible to translate directly into English. For instance, *πεννηταράκι* is a specific measure used for spirits in Greece, which would have made a clumsy translation, so I decided simply to describe them as bottles of ouzo. Nevertheless, I think the 'Greekness' of the poem is retained in translation, and this cultural specificity makes the poem's universal themes – homesickness, death, family – all the more poignant.

**Acherontia Atropos**  
**from Epistole Entomologiche**

---

L'Acherontia frequenta le campagne,  
i giardini degli uomini, le ville;  
di giorno giace contro i muri e i tronchi,  
nei corridoi più cupi, nei solai  
più desolati, sotto le grondaie,  
dorme con l'ali ripiegate a tetto.  
E n'esce a sera. Nelle sere illumi  
fredde stellate di settembre, quando  
il crepuscolo già cede alla notte  
e le farfalle della luce sono  
scomparse, l'Acherontia lamentosa  
si libra solitaria nelle tenebre  
tra i camerops, le tuje, sulle ajole  
dove dianzi scherzavano i fanciulli,  
le Vanesse, le Arginnidi, i Papilî.  
L'Acherontia s'aggira: il pippistrello  
l'evita con un guizzo repentino.  
L'Acherontia s'aggira. Alto è il silenzio  
comentato, non rotto, dalle strigi,  
dallo stridio monotono dei grilli.  
La villa è immersa nella notte. Solo  
spiccano le finestre della sala  
da pranzo dove la famiglia cena.  
L'Acherontia s'appressa esita spia  
numera i commensali ad uno ad uno,  
sibila un nome, cozza contro i vetri  
tre quattro volte come nocca ossuta.

**Acherontia Atropos**

---

Acherontia frequents countrysides,  
the gardens and villas of men:  
in the gloomiest corridors, in lofts  
left abandoned, underneath the eaves  
where it sleeps, wings roofing its head.  
Only come dusk does it venture out;  
in September's chill and starlit evenings  
when dusk already gives way to nightfall,  
with the butterflies of sunlight all  
vanished, Acherontia hovers mournful  
and solitary among the shadows  
of thuja-trees, the arbours or flowerbeds  
where its daytime cousins lately played,  
children gambolled. It is up and about;  
a bat, zigzagging, gives it a wide berth.  
Acherontia goes roaming. Deep and dense  
is the silence, unbroken by screech-owl,  
or the cricket's strident monotone.  
The villa is like some sunken ship, its sole  
identifying feature the windows  
of the room where a family take dinner.  
Acherontia nears, pauses, spies in,  
numbering, one by one, each eater,  
whistles a name, flaps against the glass  
three, four times, body a bony knocker.

*continued on page 16...*

...continued from page 15

La giovinetta più pallida s'alza  
con un sussulto, come ad un richiamo.  
«Chi c'è?» Socchiude la finestra, esplora  
il giardino invisibile, protende  
il capo d'oro nella notte illune.  
«Chi c'è? Chi c'è?» «Non c'è nessuno.  
Mamma!»  
Richiude i vetri, con un primo brivido,  
risiede a mensa, tra le sue sorelle.  
Ma già s'ode il garrito dei fanciulli  
giubilante per l'ospite improvvisa,  
per l'ospite guizzata non veduta.  
Intorno al lume turbina ronzando  
la cupa messaggiera funeraria.

Guido Gozzano

A young girl, the palest there, rises  
with a start, as if she'd been summoned.  
'Who is it?' she half-closes the window,  
explores the dim garden, her blonde head  
probing darkness, peering and peering...  
'Who is it? But, Mamma, no one's there!'  
She re-shuts the glass, with a first shudder  
sits back at the table, between her sisters.  
But already one can hear the festive chirrup  
of children delighted at their surprise guest  
and gatecrasher since darted from sight.  
Around the lamp it circles, droning –  
funeral's messenger, a dismal mascot.

Translated from the Italian  
by Martin Bennett

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### Martin Bennett's commentary

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In January I found myself up in Scotland, with a whole month free from teaching and the weariness of my own voice. Despite the snow and polar wind outside, there on the window's inside ledge nestled two butterflies, reminding me that inside my suitcase was a collected works of Guido Gozzano, the last section – *Epistole Entomologiche* – devoted to just such a creature. The subject matter, then, seemed something of gift. All the more so given that the poem sequence itself – Gozzano's 'congedo poetico' / poetic farewell (of which 'Acherontia Atropos' is just one part) – also marks his farewell to rhyme, making any translator's task that

little bit easier. Secondly, a rare privilege for a translator, the poem came with Gozzano's preliminary draft in prose thrown in, so helping to pin down the meaning. Thirdly, the series of poems was left unfinished, endowing the task of translation with a sense of urgency. To quote the editorial notes on Gozzano's premature death from TB, the poem was found 'on four pages torn from an exercise book of which the cover is lost. The writing is in pen, black ink becoming progressively less intense, with occasional additions in pencil.' This with another note on how Gozzano had remarked to his mother, 'If I don't make

it through (his illness), the fragments of *Epistole Entomologiche* will find themselves without an editor.' Translator then as part, however belatedly, of a rescue team, seeking to ensure that Gozzano's fears remain unfounded.

So much for the translator. The original poet has long, like the proverbial butterfly sprawling upon a pin, been grouped with the so-called 'Crepuscolari' / Twilights, his having written himself into a hyper-literary dead end. *Epistole Entomologiche* marked a new beginning, the young disillusioned and ironic literateur finding in a lifelong passion for entomology a new way to re-connect.

### Poetry translation

#### Stephen Spender Prize in association with the *Guardian*

Launched in 2004 and supported for the past three years by the Old Possum's Practical Trust and the Dr Mortimer and Theresa Sackler Foundation, this annual prize celebrates the art of literary translation and aims to encourage a new generation of literary translators. Entrants translate a poem from any language – ancient or modern – into English, and submit both the original and their translation together with a commentary of not more than 300 words. There are prizes in three categories: Open, 18-and-under and 14-and-under. Booklets of winning entries from previous years can be obtained from the Trust or downloaded from its website, which also provides advice for entrants, an attempt (with examples) by former judge George Szirtes to categorise translated poetry, and a growing bank of poetry translation activities aimed at teachers.

Previously restricted to UK and Irish citizens and residents, the Stephen Spender Prize will open in 2016 to entrants from all over the world and incorporate the Joseph Brodsky/Stephen Spender Prize for the translation of Russian poetry, which is supported by the Derek Hill Foundation and commemorates the friendship between Joseph Brodsky and Stephen Spender.

### Translation in education

#### Translators in Schools

This professional development programme, developed by award-winning translator Sarah Ardizzone and teacher Sam Holmes, delivered by the Stephen Spender Trust and funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and European Commission, was established to widen the pool of translators with the skills to run translation workshops in schools. The first training day covers translation activities, lesson planning and classroom management; day 2 sees participants trying out their own mini-workshops on 9–11 year olds brought in from a local primary school; the final stage is for participants to develop longer workshops of their own and deliver them in schools. Translators in Schools graduates may be contacted via [www.translatorsinschools.org](http://www.translatorsinschools.org).

The programme has expanded in the past year to provide training for teachers interested in introducing translation activities into their teaching and has become part of a wider movement – ‘multilingual creativity’ – which



**Stephen Spender** – poet, critic, editor and translator – lived from 1909 to 1995. Inspired by his literary interests and achievements, the Stephen Spender Trust was set up to widen appreciation of the literary legacy of Stephen Spender and his contemporaries and promote literary translation.

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is about engaging positively with the many languages spoken by young people in the UK. Translators in Schools and Translation Nation (*see below*) use multilingualism as a crucible for creativity and learning, linking to National Curriculum objectives in literacy, modern languages and citizenship. With its intrinsically dual-language focus, translation is an ideal tool for drawing on multilingual skills while also benefiting children with no languages other than English. Crucially, children who take part in Translators in Schools workshops do not need to speak or read the source language in order to transform it into creative expression in the target language. What matters is that the journey *between* both languages develops the children's literacy skills, as well as their playful grasp of storytelling through negotiating cultural difference and semantic nuance.

The Big Translate, supported by public funding from the National Lottery through Arts Council England and by the European Commission, was an opportunity for ten translators from the Translators in Schools programme to run a public workshop. As

part of the October 2015 London Literature Festival, the translators helped 60 children from four of the Southbank Centre's associate primary schools to translate into English ten strikingly illustrated books from around the world. Working with seven languages, some of which used a non-roman alphabet, the children discovered that everything – from pictures, to story and tone – needs translating. They become code-cracking language detectives, using glossaries to create first a literal translation then a polished, nuanced version. They learnt what translation involves, what happens to books when they make the journey from one language (and culture) to another, and how languages and translated literature enrich our lives. The children then took to the stage to talk about what they had learnt, throwing in for good measure the animal sounds they had translated and the hybrid animals they had invented.

#### Translation Nation

This award-winning collaboration between the Stephen Spender Trust and Eastside Educational Trust has been funded by Arts Council England, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Mercers' Company. The aim of the three-day primary workshops is to highlight to children and their families how language and literature provide a window into other cultures; raise the profile of community languages in schools; and increase participants' understanding of how language functions, helping them develop clearer and more nuanced English. The double-period secondary workshops aim to encourage language-learning, celebrate the linguistic diversity found in our schools and generate a curiosity about world literature. They also instil recognition of the important role translation plays in our lives, opening participants' eyes to the many career opportunities open to those who speak other languages. Between 2011 and 2014 workshops were delivered in some 42 primary schools and 14 secondary schools.

To date Translation Nation has run mostly in Greater London. Subject to funding, we hope from 2016 to deliver it in schools in three regional hubs, as well as offering it again in London.

### The archive programme

#### The Stephen and Natasha Spender archives

Stephen and Natasha Spender's manuscripts, letters, diaries and other personal papers are now available to readers in the University of Oxford's Bodleian Library.

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#### Contacting the Trust

For more information about the Stephen Spender Trust and its activities, please contact  
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