The Long Nights of Anna Alrutz by Ilva Fabiani
Original title: Le lunghe notti di Anna Alrutz
Language: Italian
Length: 252 pages
Genre: Literary fiction
Original publisher: Feltrinelli, 2014
Rights holder: Feltrinelli
Other languages sold: n/a
LBF location: Stand 4N10i

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Cellar Child by Kristien Dieltiens
Original title: Kelderkind
Language: Dutch
Length: 485 pages
Genre: Young adult crossover
Original publisher: De Eenhoorn, 2012
Rights holder: De Eenhoorn
Other languages sold: Danish and German
LBF location: c/o Flemish Literature Fund, 6F50

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A Brief Respite by Antonio Orejudo
Original title: Un momento de descanso
Language: Spanish
Length: 248 pages
Genre: Literary fiction
Original publisher: Tusquets Editores, 2011
Rights holder: Tusquets Editores
Other languages sold: n/a
LBF location: Table 4N10, NEP zone

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**Thick of It** by Ulrike Almut Sandig  
Original title: *Dickicht*  
Language: German  
Length: 80 pages  
Genre: Poetry  
Original publisher: Schöffling & Co, 2011  
Rights holder: Schöffling & Co  
Other languages sold: n/a  
LBF location: c/o English PEN, Literary Translation Centre  

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**Children of War** by Ahmet Yorulmaz  
Original title: *Savaşın Çocukları*  
Language: Turkish  
Length: 143 pages  
Genre: Literary fiction  
Original publisher: Remzi Kitabevi, 1997  
Rights holder: Onk Agency  
Other languages sold: Greek and Albanian  
LBF location: c/o English PEN, Literary Translation Centre  

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**A Taste for Immortality** by Catherine Dufour  
Original title: *Le goût de l’immortalité*  
Language: French  
Length: 249 pages  
Genre: Literary science-fiction  
Original publisher: Les Éditions Mnémos, 2005  
Rights holder: Mon Agent et Companie  
Other languages sold: n/a  
Stand number: c/o English PEN, Literary Translation Centre  

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English PEN’s ‘PEN Presents’ initiative aims to put literary translators in the driving seat as champions of international writers and their books for an English-speaking audience. We want to help UK publishers to discover – and publish – the most exciting books from around the world, and we want to support emerging translators in their development as advocates for international literature, in an age where all writers (including translators) need to be more active ‘off the page’ than ever before.

‘PEN Presents... Europe’ has been developed in partnership with EUNIC (European Union National Institutes for Culture) London and the Czech Centre. The translators who submitted the six winning books will each be awarded a prize of £250, and will all take part in a celebratory event at London’s Free Word Centre in June.

This pilot round of PEN Presents has given us a glimpse into what can happen when literary translators get into the driving seat as champions of international literature. Translators are hugely important to the work of English PEN, and it feels appropriate that this new initiative is all about supporting them in their development as literary advocates, as well as helping them to make new connections with publishers both in the UK and abroad. The six European titles which have won in this round are genuinely exciting and I hope UK publishers take note!

Future rounds of ‘PEN Presents’ aim to travel to Asia, Africa and the Americas, as well as to ‘under-represented’ genres such as children’s literature. So watch this space... but for now, welcome to Europe!
The Long Nights of Anna Alrutz spans the years between the birth in 1907 of the protagonist, Anna Alrutz, and her suicide in 1935, charting the course of Hitler’s rise to power. The story is narrated from the viewpoint of Anna after her death, trapped in a limbo where she relives the scenes of her life and tries to make sense of the choices she made.

Anna’s family is comfortably off and unsympathetic to the Nazi regime. They live in the city of Braunschweig, but spend their summers at a mountain spa for the sake of Anna’s chronically ill mother and sister. There she develops a deep friendship with another summer visitor, Helene, and a doomed passion for the married pastor Rudinski. Despairing at the impossibility of the relationship and longing for a purpose in life, she becomes attracted to the certainties that National Socialism offers. She trains as a doctor but abandons her studies, disillusioned after her sister’s death, enrolling instead as a braune Schwester, an elite band of nurses who have sworn allegiance to Hitler. At the clinic in Göttingen, Anna is committed to her involvement in the sterilisation programme. But when Helene is admitted the scales finally fall from her eyes.

This novel is chilling, heartbreaking and above all an extraordinary exploration of character. In a thoughtful and sensitive investigation into what makes an ordinary person subscribe to a loathsome regime, life in Germany between the wars is vividly depicted, as Nazi ideology gains strength and anti-Semitism becomes increasingly overt.

The characters have tremendous strength and complexity. Anna, the protagonist, is particularly compelling: attracted to order and structure, she is nevertheless subject to strong passions – for her friend Helene, for the pastor Rudinski, for Professor Hartmann at the Göttingen clinic, and finally for Thierry, a French (and Jewish) medical student. A creature of paradox, she alternately defends and rejects Jewish friends, is drawn to Nazi Youth and repelled by it, despises her communist brother and loves him. Because she is ultimately redeemed, the reader feels sympathy for her as well as despair. Other intriguing characters include Rudinski, the weak-willed, sexually ambivalent pastor and Hartmann, the committed – but covertly part-Jewish – supporter of Hitler’s eugenic policies.

The narrative pace is brilliantly maintained: it’s a difficult book to put down. It would translate well into English and would appeal to readers who enjoyed Hans Fallada’s Alone in Berlin and Markus Zusak’s The Book Thief.

Originally self-published, Le lunghe notti di Anna Alrutz was subsequently published by Feltrinelli after winning the 2013 national ‘ilmioesordio’ competition for new Italian writing, together with the Scuola Holden prize for originality. Fabiani has also won the 2015 Città di Cuneo prize for a first novel. The book has sold 3,500 copies in Italy.

‘Ilva Fabiani’s novel is indispensible. Indispensible because, with unquestionable style, it draws us into the machinery of power, manipulation and fear that subjugated a whole nation … An important reminder of the fact that the past never leaves us.’ Le recensione di Scuola Holden

‘A savage and courageous novel … Never didactic, the writing is fresh, inspired, precise and always true to the protagonist’s story.’ Tatiana Traini, Quarta parete

‘The narrative crescendo is tremendous.’ Maurizio Tiriticco, Education 2.0

Born in 1970 in Ascoli Piceno, Italy, Ilva Fabiani lives in Germany and teaches Italian at the University of Göttingen. Le lunghe notti di Anna Alrutz is her first novel, the fruit of three years research in public and private archives, inspired by a disturbing discovery: the university building where she works was used, between 1934 and 1945, as a clinic for sterilizing 787 women and 1,300 men under Nazi eugenic legislation.

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My nights are long because I work.

The night shift leaves you, just before dawn, with swollen feet and dark circles under your eyes. Then, every morning, a rosy light streams into the wards. Greta takes over from me and I head off to my room on the third floor, like a spent candle. But there's another reason why my nights are long. When you're scared of being found out, time goes slowly. Dread spreads over you like a disease, prickling your skin, making you jumpy. You see spies in the darkness, you fear the guards at the entrance.

My name was Anna Alrutz, service number 271207 – which was also my date of birth. That's what I was called, and I assume that's what I'm still called, in this dusky half-light where neither days nor rhythms exist. I'm a braune Schwester, one of the new specialist nurses dreamt up by the Führer, groggy from studying the deserving life of a healthy baby and the undeserving life of a crippled child. The patients recognise me. I'm not dressed in white like the others and they know why that is. My uniform is brown linen, with a snow-white pinafore which I wash every day and a coquettish little cap that I no longer wear. I earn one hundred and twenty Reichsmarks a month; the other nurses barely earn forty. When I'm filling in the patients' files I never make spelling mistakes. My father allowed me to attend the girls' high school and to study medicine. And after three years I threw it all away and enlisted with the braunen Schwestern. I cried when I put the uniform on for the first time. At last I'd found a purpose in life: loyalty to the Führer and to the new nation that I wanted to help prosper. My enrolment came after a year full of sorrows. My sister Hedwin's illness, my quarrels with my father, the difficulties I was having with my studies. The brown uniform was like a nun's habit, legitimising my devotion to a new cause.

I wasn't yet thirty when I died, one December night when muddy sleet was falling from the sky. And now, if I look around all these years later, I hardly recognise the hospital where I worked. I can't see them any more, the post-partum mothers. I don't know where the swaddled babies are, or my colleagues Greta, Wilhelmine and Frida, or the doctors, or Moritz the caretaker. Where are they, where have they hidden themselves? It's all so different. In the auditorium there was a white marble operating table that I used to scrub diligently every morning. Where would it have been taken? The west wing, which housed the sterilisation clinic, has been cut in half like a pat of butter. The cherry tree in the courtyard has been removed. In May it always flowered punctually, oblivious even to the war. Everything's changed and I've changed too. Once, in this strange half-light where I've ended up, I tried to find my legs and feet. I bent my head as far as I could, just as I used to do when I was a child, exploring the freckles on my stomach. But the result was a laborious somersault in mid-air. I don't exist any more; I'll have to face up to it. I weigh nothing and I have no body. My mortal remains have been buried in the Braunschweig cemetery, in the Alrutz family tomb, next to my grandfather Anton and his wife Lise. My sister Hedwin is nearby. And I've become a puff of air, existing in a void. Can anyone tell me why I'm trapped here like this? Is it a punishment, a game, a challenge? Is it perhaps the revenge of a God that I resolutely ignored in my lifetime?

Now and then an icy wind lifts me up and catapults me backwards. Episodes and people from my past resurface in random sequences, often without any logic. I see the scenes again and again, dozens of times, and each time I only pick up on the same details – so what's the point of this bizarre exercise?

Today I still don't know if I can really claim any credit for my virtuous and futile rebellion against the follies of the Führer. If I hadn't known Frida and Thierry, both of them so reckless and impulsive, maybe I would have continued sterilising, recording and archiving for another ten or twenty years. Certainly, compared with them I was nothing but a lowly foot soldier. Trembling with fear, every night. Including the night I died.


I wasn't even thirty. The sleet was muddy and the cold drilled into your bones.

1.

Frida, looking pleased with herself, met me when I arrived at Göttingen.

I came out of the station to find a car waiting for me in the square. She was virtually standing to attention, her arms held rigidly at her sides, next to the car. Moritz,
the caretaker, was inside. ‘The doctor is expecting you,’ she said, smiling radiantly like a little girl about to open a present. Thin and bony, her white uniform wrapped around her body like a bandage around a wound. She snatched glances at my uniform through the rear view mirror, choosing her words carefully. She told me that we were going to the most modern gynaecological clinic in Germany and that in recent years deaths in childbirth had become extremely rare. She also told me that I’d have a room all to myself. I nodded, asking no questions.

Dozens of times I’ve relived the moment I arrived in Göttingen, in the hospital car commandeered by Moritz. I can still smell the sharp scent of his cologne. Every time it happens, I’m sitting next to the young woman I then was, looking at her closely. At her light eyes and that curl of hair which keeps escaping from her cap. I’d like to touch her, to stroke her head. To comfort her and prepare her for everything she would go through over the next two years, before her – my – death. I look at her sturdy shoulders and her hands in her lap. ‘A true Aryan!’ Meinhardt used to say, while she adjusted the collar of my uniform. Moritz turns left into Kirchweg, and I lay the hand I don’t have any more on Frida’s skinny shoulder. She turns towards the window and closes it. I’m just a draught of icy air, nothing more.

On the journey I thought constantly about the time when I would again see Professor Hartmann – my mentor, my guide, the reason I decided to return to Göttingen, despite the fact that my studies had come to such an ignominious end there.

Good, he said, I’m glad our paths have crossed again. You were an excellent student and you’ll be an excellent nurse too, I’m sure of it. You’ll be treated with respect, but to start with you’ll have to work twice as hard. You’ll take specialist courses in obstetrics and you’ll be responsible for standardising job functions. Frau Meinhardt spoke very highly of you. It’s women like you that this country needs! He got to his feet to shake my hand. Hartmann himself came to the door, in a dressing gown, and shook my hand. A copy of the circular, heavily underlined, was lying on the table. He told me that we had to work up a plan, talk to the nurses and if necessary sack those who might prove unsuitable. As for funding, it would be quite sufficient. We would expand the delivery room and the auditorium. And also the surgery for sterilisations – perfectly normal procedures, of course. No signs, no directions, everything clean and orderly. Read here, do you know what Gütt says? That sterilisation is an act of love towards one’s fellow citizen. And towards future generations. To cleanse the nation of sick people and delinquents. The Führer has great plans for Germany, he said.

Emma Mandley’s first degree was in Italian and History of Art and she was recently awarded a Masters degree in Translation Studies, specialising in Italian, by the University of Bristol. Emma’s career has been spent mainly in broadcasting and the arts, but she is now focusing on literary translation. Current clients include the Books in Italy website and Walker Books. She translates into English from French as well as from Italian and is based in London. Emma is an associate member of the Society of Authors.

www.booksinitaly.it/translators/emma-mandley
Cellar Child (Kelderkind) is a gripping historical novel aimed at the young adult crossover market. It centres on the true and intriguing story of Kaspar Hauser, a teenager found in Nuremberg, Germany, on Whit Monday, 1828. When the boy is first discovered he can barely walk and is unable to speak, with the exception of a single sentence, repeated parrot-fashion. Suspected of being a Wolf Child, he is initially imprisoned while investigations are carried out into his likely origins. It becomes clear that he has been locked in a small cellar for most of his life, affecting his normal physical and psychological development. Although Kaspar is very intelligent and soon learns to speak, read and write, his years of isolation in the dark cellar have caused him to see the world in a very different way to the norm, leading others to perceive him as a simonion, liar or fraud.

Kaspar’s story is interwoven with that of Manfred, his fictive antagonist, whose own life and character has many parallels with Kasper’s. Gradually the mysteries in both stories are revealed and the shadowy political background of the time is seen to have ruled the fates of both characters.

Kristien Dieltiens has created a novel of great psychological insight. Set in Hungary and Germany, against the backdrop of the Napoleonic wars, Dieltiens gives the tale a rich cultural and historical background which makes it far from bleak, in spite of its inherent tragedy. The novel is also notable for its variation of style and viewpoint, being told from three distinct perspectives. The style chosen for Kaspar’s own account of himself is particularly interesting, as it grapples with the nature of thought and language in naked, sometimes heart-wrenching, simplicity.

The boy Kaspar was known as ‘The Child of Europe’, partly because of the intense interest he created in European countries and further afield (an account of his discovery was published in two different English translations in England and America while Kaspar still lived), and partly because of the political games that played out around him. An English translation of Dieltiens’ novel would present a moving version of his story to a new generation of English-speaking readers, and familiarize them with the European culture of the period. At the same time, as the title shows, it has clear contemporary resonances.

Kelderkind was awarded the 2013 Woutertje Pieterse Prize, one of the most prestigious prizes awarded each year for Dutch-language children’s and young adult books. The jury praised Dieltiens’ refined style, the scope and ambition of her writing, her ability to bring historical characters to life, and the power and expressiveness of her prose. The book sold 5,000 copies in the Netherlands (which is considerable for the size of the market) and rights have been sold in Danish and German.

‘This golden jubilee book is a work that transports its readers into a state of pure literary pleasure.’ Iedereenleest.be

‘Cellar Child is an epic story about life and identity that is hard to put down.’ De Morgen

‘Kristien Dieltiens masters the complex story in what can easily be called her magnum opus.’ De Standaard

Kristien Dieltiens was born in 1954 in Antwerp, Belgium. Kelderkind, published in 2012, is her fiftieth book and was the winner of the 2013 Woutertje Pieterse Prize. Several of Dieltiens’ previous books have been nominated for prizes and her historical novel Olrac won first prize in the 12-14 class of the Kinder-en Jeugdjury (2002). Her historical books, including Kelderkind, are notable for their filmic and sensory qualities, and for their great sense of authenticity. She achieves this by immersing herself deeply in the worlds she depicts. Dieltiens’ books have already been translated into several different languages, including German, Danish, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Japanese, but have not yet appeared in English.
The main third-person narrative is from the point of view of Isolde, a young lady who has taken an interest in the well-being of the foundling, Kaspar Hauser. In the first section of this extract she is thinking back to when she first met him, before he had truly learned how to speak. She has just returned from visiting Kaspar on what will turn out to be his death-bed. The second section is from the diary which Isolde asked Kaspar to write and is in his own voice. The horse mentioned in the diary section is a damaged wooden horse, Kaspar’s only plaything. Emile is Isolde’s servant.

(i)

What was it that upset her so much about this boy? The peasant clothes he wore somehow didn’t seem to match him. She saw blood on his shoes, but not a word fell from his lips.

Most of all, it was the look in his light blue eyes that she’d never forget: they were empty and inward gazing. He couldn’t understand anything at all, but didn’t look like an idiot. She laid her hand on his, and there was no reaction. A madman would have bellowed like a wounded animal, or hit out wildly. And yet you could hardly call this creature a human being. He was more some kind of husk in the form of a human boy.

She couldn’t say he was ugly. His features were regular and he had soft, beautifully shaped lips. His skin was fair, almost as rosy as a baby’s, with light down on his chin and upper lip. His hair was dark blond and gleaming, curling lightly round his forehead, like a child’s. The blue of his eyes was like the wild chicory of the wayside.

But his eyes had no soul, and so she couldn’t call him handsome. For the first time she asked herself the question: can a person be born without a soul? Could you lose your soul? And in that case, could you find it again? Something about the boy touched her deeply, for she held his hand more firmly and realized that all of this was significant.

How could she then have suspected that their lives would become so intertwined?

‘Who are you?’ she asked him.

He kept on repeating the sentence like a wind-up toy. Like her father’s snuffbox. Every time he opened the lid you’d hear a little tune. Did the boy even understand what he was saying?

‘Fräulein, he could be dangerous,’ Emile whispered. ‘He might have rabies, or the plague, or scarlet fever.’ He shrank back. ‘Perhaps he’s a wolf boy!’

[...]

Isolde tried to form an impression of his origins. He had a coarse felt hat on, lined with yellow silk, with a red leather band on the outside. A city dweller’s hat. His feet, covered in blood blisters, were visible through the torn boots. They were high-heeled and shod with iron and hobnails. They were clearly too small for him, and were simply made. They seemed like something a stable boy might wear. He was wearing a peasant shirt, made of linen, and over that a faded brick-red spotted waistcoat. His coat looked like a jerkin, but wasn’t. Someone had cut off the collar to make it seem so. The light-grey pantaloons looked like riding breeches, appropriate for a groom or a huntsman. In short, his whole outfit was cobbled together, like a jigsaw puzzle where the pieces didn’t fit.

(ii)

To my mother

I don’t know you. Do you know me?

I think about you every day and ask myself who you are, and why you gave me away.

There has to be a reason why you couldn’t look after me anymore.

If only I could meet you, even just once in my life. And then I wouldn’t mind dying.

Isolde said I should keep a diary.

I want to do so for her, but for you too, mother. Perhaps one day you’ll get to know me. Will I then be able to find the right words to tell you who I was?

Isolde said I should tell the story of my life for myself too, but it’s difficult. It makes my head ache. How can I write about the time when I didn’t know any words yet?

I’ll let Isolde read everything when my story’s finished, before I give it to you.
Hopefully she won’t be disappointed that I jump from pillar to post.

Herr Meyer gets so cross about it. I learned the saying ‘from pillar to post’ off him. It’s a funny saying, but confusing too. Because it’s like that in my head. I can’t narrate the parts of my life in their right order. In my head it’s all mixed up. But I always keep my room and my clothes very tidy, so at least there’s something of mine that’s organized.

There are two Kaspars inside me. Kaspar One wants to try everything to write down his Then and his When He First Began To Gather Words and Thoughts.

Kaspar Two knows What He Is Now and What He Must Become.

No one understands me when I say that Kaspar Then was much happier than Kaspar Now.

I want to explain it to Isolde, but I don’t know if that’s possible. But you, my dear mother, will understand me.

For a while now I’ve lived among people. They’ve taught me everything I have to know. I have everything I need to survive, but still... Everyone has someone. I have only myself.

I haven’t done anything bad to anyone, and yet I’m afraid. Someone wants to hurt me, but no one believes me.

When I first came among people, I still had everything to learn.

I’ve been with lots of people, in different houses. Everywhere I’ve added something to my learning.

First, I lived with Gaoler Hiltel, in the prison tower. From him I learned that there were other people in the world.

And then Herr Daumer and his wife took me into their house. Daumer taught me to read and write and many other things too. He also tested drops and tinctures and different medicines on me. I was very often ill in his house.

Then Herr von Tucher became my guardian. But because he didn’t want to look after me himself, I was sent to Johann and Klara Biberbach. What I learned there, I daren’t write about. Not yet. Perhaps later. My chest tightens when I think of it.

But my guardian introduced me to Philip, my foster-father. He doesn’t visit me anymore and doesn’t answer my letters. I don’t understand it. He tells everyone that I’m a fraud.

He sent me to lodge with Herr Meyer. Herr Meyer receives many kreutzers so he’ll look after me and he also says I’m a fraud.

Will I ever see my mother again? Is it true what people say of me? Do the newspapers tell the truth about me? How could that be, when even I don’t know what the truth is?

Only Isolde and Judge Feuerbach believe me.

‘Your truth is just as valid and important as another person’s truth,’ the Judge says.

The daughter of an English father and Dutch mother, Antoinette Fawcett grew up for a few years as a bilingual child but subsequently lost her Dutch as it was used less and less. After a career teaching English language and literature in the UK and abroad, Fawcett returned to her childhood language, obtaining an MA in Literary Translation (Distinction) at the University of East Anglia (2008). She followed this with a PhD in Literary Translation at the same institution (2014). She is now establishing herself in Dutch-to-English literary translation, with specialisms in challenging and well-written young adult and children’s literature and modern poetry.

www.thewordshaper.com
Antonio Orejudo’s comic tour de force is a Spanish version of a form that has traditionally appealed strongly to the English public, the campus novel. It is the masterpiece of one of the most interesting writers currently at work, a novel that manages to combine serious themes – the eternal and depressing brain drain abroad of the best and most qualified Spaniards, the incoherent attitude that many Spaniards have towards their own culture and history, the scars left on the culture and psyche of Spain by the willed ignorance of the Franco years – and manages to combine them in a page-turner that blends fact and fiction, conspiracy theory and revenge thriller, comic fantasy and dark exploration of contemporary shibboleths. It reads like W.G. Sebald with a sense of humour, or a globalised Lucky Jim for the twenty-first century. Orejudo shows himself to be a master at constructing a narrative, at working out a complex structure within which the most bizarre events seem natural, logical even, as they develop into a delirious fantasy on the decadence of the world in which most of us are currently forced to live. It is a major contemporary European novel.

The novel is in three sections:

1. Arturo Cifuentes, a friend of the narrator (a Sebald-esque ‘Antonio Orejudo’) goes with his wife and teenage son to teach in racially-charged Missouri after failing to find work in Spain. After grotesque misadventures, Cifuentes loses his job, and his marriage, trying to uphold his own imagined standards in a community riven by identity politics.

2. ‘Orejudo’ describes his farcical postgraduate life, including a scene where he accidentally ejaculates on one of the surviving manuscripts of the medieval poem ‘El Cid’, and his volunteering for experimental medical research which fundamentally alters his brain: this section is called ‘How I became a writer’.

3. ‘Orejudo’ and Cifuentes decide to investigate their former university professor. In doing so, they uncover some nasty truths about his past in the Spanish dictatorship, and ‘Orejudo’ finds out some even nastier ones about Cifuentes’s family and experiences in Missouri.

Un momento de descanso was awarded the Premio Estado Crítico (Novel Category) in 2011 ‘for its forthright treatment of themes which many regard as sacred, such as political correctness and historical memory, using a style far removed from flattery or sectarianism, and always deploying humour as its chief weapon. And for its clear demonstration that postmodern games can aspire to absolute intellectual rigour without sacrificing any desire for entertainment and without alienating readers who are unversed in the intricacies of critical theory’. It is a bestseller in Spain, selling 21,000 copies to date.

Original title: Un momento de descanso
Language: Spanish
Length: 248 pages
Genre: Literary fiction
Original publisher: Tusquets Editores, 2011
Rights holder: Tusquets Editores
Other languages sold: n/a
LBF location: Table 4N10, NEP zone
Arturo Cifuentes turned up in June 2009. I was signing my books in the Madrid Book Fair when he appeared at my publisher’s stall.

And he says whooo, whooo, I’m a ghost from the past. I have come to disrupt the present.

I recognised him at once. He was the same as always, or at least that was the impression I got, him in the same black jeans and his perennial sports jacket.

And I say, Cifuentes!

And I came out of the stall to give him a hug.

He had a little less hair than previously, but he hadn’t got much fatter.

And he says, I’m a ghost, aren’t you frightened?

And I say, no, not at all. Why should I be frightened? I’m happy to see you, man. Some ghost. I say, what are you doing here?

He says, I live here. The one who’s visiting is you.

I say, what do you mean you live here? You’re back from the States?

He says, yes, I’ve been back for more than a year.

I say, what about Lib? I say, what about Edgar?

He says, there’s lots of things have happened, Antonio, so many since the last time we wrote to each other. Some of them were grotesque, some were terrifying, some... well, there’s some you won’t believe.

We hadn’t seen each other for seventeen years. We had tried to keep in touch by letter, but that kind of fizzled out. I would have liked it if Cifuentes had, right at that moment, right there, told me all the grotesque and terrifying and unbelievable things that had happened to him, but I couldn’t give him all that much time that morning. I said we should have lunch the next day in Bartleby, but Cifuentes refused flat out. He didn’t refuse to have lunch with me, but he refused to eat in Bartleby. He was sick of leek tartlets on a bed of seafood with caramelised banana marmalade. Haute cuisine had become available to too wide a public, he said, and laughed raucously. He was missing sweetbreads and grilled pigs’ ears.

And he says, also, they’ve got all their lah-di-dah refinements and their meta-gastronomy, but at Bartleby they still use stock cubes for their potage à la Joyce. I’m allergic to monosodium glutamate and the last time I went to Bartleby I had to go to A&E, so Bartleby’s out: I suggest Calagüela.

Calagüela was an old bar from our youth that was still open, just off the Gran Via, in the Calle del Desengaño, Disappointment Street, a name that turned out to be very appropriate for what came later. We met there, and as we ate our patatas bravas and grilled mushrooms, Cifuentes told me that he and Lib had got divorced and that he had come to Madrid, to the university, as a visiting professor, which was a post that should already have been made permanent some time before. That’s what he had been promised. He had given up the economic advantages of his sixteen years of professional life in the United States in order to come back to Spain for good. For the time being – he emphasised this for the time being several times – he didn’t regret a thing. Although the full-time professorship was taking a bit too long to come through, he couldn’t imagine himself taking another plane and flying back to Missouri. What would he do in Missouri?

I was surprised to hear about Missouri. I hadn’t heard that they had moved. Last I’d heard of them they’d been in Manhattan, in an apartment on Forty Sixth Street. Cifuentes at Rutgers and Lib, just about to give birth, with a post-doctoral appointment lined up at Saint Peter’s Hospital. But of course that was seventeen years ago, and in the time between then and now some of those grotesque and terrifying and unbelievable things had happened that he’d warned me about the day before: Edgar had been born and when he was two they had detected a slight mental disability, caused by a defective link in his DNA. Fragile X Syndrome, they’d said.

Lib had given up studying haematology and had focussed on studying this unknown illness. For the next ten years everything she read was related to the syndrome. She started her own research group, published a huge number of articles, got federal funding and ended up attracting the attention of laboratories and universities. One of them, the University of Missouri, offered her a post at its prestigious Department of Genetics and Biomedicine. And as the people who had been sent to sign her up saw that she wasn’t all that inclined to change her New York
apartment for a ranch-style house in the Midwest, they also put up a contract for her husband, just as generous as hers but in a less prestigious, more obscure part of the university: the Department of Spanish.

But they didn’t move to Missouri just for the money. They also took the job because Missouri gave them unbeatable possibilities for unhappiness. Unhappiness. Missouri gave them the chance to suffer, to create problems in order to solve them, and when an opportunity like that comes along, you have to grasp it with both hands. Cifuentes’s theory is that human beings are problem-solving machines, that we’re genetically programmed to survive in adverse circumstances. Which is absolutely great if you live in a cave. But nowadays, when basic questions of survival are all sorted out and very few people live in caves, our magnificent problem-solving equipment refuses to wither away and we have to bring it along with us, having it always interfere in our comfortable urban lives. Westerners in the twenty-first century don’t have any problems. What we call problems are things like having no ink in the printer, or not being able to find a Sunday newspaper. We live relatively peacefully until one day the problem-solving machine, which has been idly turning over all this time, spontaneously kicks into action. And that’s when you want to climb Mount Everest or move to Missouri.

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So they moved to Missouri. Cifuentes drove with Edgar, both of them terrified all along the interstates, that kingdom ruled by the truckers who drove day and night, high on coke. Cifuentes and Edgar slept in roadside motels. It had been a long time since Cifuentes had slept with his son. He hadn’t seen him naked since he was a child. He was surprised to see him so hairy, and also to note the size of his genitals: macroorchidism was what they called it, the genital hypertrophy that was one of the signs of the syndrome.

It should be obligatory for fathers and sons to share a room at least two or three times a year. To take their shoes off, show that they too can be vulnerable, to admit that they all have toes with nails that need to be cut in a particularly uncomfortable position, to take their clothes off in an unpleasant damp room, to put on their grotesque pyjamas... How all that would bring the generations together!

When they reached Columbia, the diminutive Missouri city where the university was, the removals van had only just reached Cincinnati, and so they had to spend another night in a hotel. This time the Holiday Inn did not have any twin rooms, just one with a single enormous Queen Size mattress, and so they had no option but to share.

Lying next to one another while they watched an action movie on the TV, they kept a safe distance from one another and made no reference to the situation. But when he had turned out the light, Cifuentes began to speak:

‘How old are you, Edgar? Thirteen?’

‘Nearly fourteen.’

‘I was trying to remember how long it’s been since we slept in the same bed. Ten years? Eleven, perhaps? I am aware that you find it embarrassing to share a bed with me; maybe you won’t believe it, but it’s true. I imagine myself sleeping in the same bed as my own father and I know just how uncomfortable you feel. But there used to be a time when it was the best thing in the world to sleep together. I’m sure you don’t remember. Your memory has wiped it out; you couldn’t live in peace if you remembered it and missed it. Sleeping in a tent, each of us in his own sleeping bag, was really great. For both of us.’

As Edgar didn’t answer, and as it was clear that he was feeling uncomfortable with this sudden attack of sentimentality, Cifuentes decided to close his eyes and go to sleep. He woke up as dawn was breaking, but he didn’t get up straight away; he lay for a while, face up, listening to the breathing at his side, where Edgar lay curled into a ball. One of his arms was flung out, as if he had wanted to embrace his father as he slept and had changed his mind at the last minute.

James Womack was born in 1979 in England and has lived in Spain since 2008. He is a founding editor of Nevsky Prospects, a Madrid-based publishing house that produces Spanish versions of Russian literature. His translations from Spanish include Roberto Arlt’s El juguete rabioso (The Mad Toy, Hesperus 2013), Julia Navarro’s Dispara, yo ya estoy muerto (Shoot Me, I’m Already Dead, Random House Mondadori 2014) and Sergio Del Molino’s La hora violeta (The Violet Hour, forthcoming from Hispabooks 2016). He is also a poet: his first collection, Misprint, was published by Carcanet in 2012.
Ulrike Almut Sandig is one of the very best of a new generation of writers making their mark in the contemporary German literary landscape. On the one hand, her poetry deals in the recognisably real: from the city, or landscapes of the South to the minutiae of the everyday. But hers is also a voice tinged with nostalgia that harks back to models from the past, a compass needle finely tuned to an existential north that is overshadowed by absence and loss, always in search for what has disappeared. Her language reflects this ambivalence: splicing a contemporary idiom with snippets of Grimm's fairy tales or children's rhymes, fairy-tale and quotations from the German canon with a telling irony. One poem might reference a 17th-century hymn; in another a ‘garrulous dove’ might babble one of the most famous lines of German poetry, Goethe’s ‘Uber allen Gipfein ist Ruh’ (‘above all the tree tops is peace’). But what makes her most special is the way a profound scepticism, a patient awareness of the uncertainties of language, is married with sheer musicality. She is a musician and electrifying performer who works with film, sound installation, music and spoken word to bring poetry to new audiences.

The poems from her most recent collection Dickicht (2011), take us into a ‘thicket’ that is at once the world, the psyche and language itself. This is reflected in the structure of the volume that balances sections entitled ‘North’ and ‘South’ with a single poem between them (‘Centre of the World’). At the centre of this poem is a line that locates a fissure, a tear ‘at the centre of the body’. Thus large historical or geographical concerns constantly inscribe themselves into, and find their way back to, the vital textures of the individual. The poems look for a way out in language and explore it at its most suggestive and most transformative, so as to constantly put the audience on the back foot. Experiencing these poems (and one does experience them rather than listen to them) one comes away with a strong feeling of instability and precariousness. But if the poems always seem to go in search of a self, a home, they are also simultaneously and teasingly aware that I not such an easy thing to catch up with. This is a moving, humorous and pretty spectacular verbal vanishing act that urgently deserves an audience in the English language.

‘Steam-Punk that turns and stretches the soul.’ Literaturseiten

‘The exquisite composition, comedy and nuanced tones.’ Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

‘A master story teller whose perfectly poised narrative continues at just the right pace for readers to appreciate the exquisite detail of her writing.’ New Books in German

Ulrike Almut Sandig was born in 1979 in Saxony in the former East Germany and now lives in Berlin. Two prose books – Flamingos (2010) and Buch gegen das Verschwinden (2015) – and three volumes of her poetry – Zunder (2005), Streumen (2007) and Dickicht (2011) – have been published to date alongside radio plays and audio-books of poetry and pop music. She has won numerous prizes, both for poetry and short stories, including most recently the Droste-Förderpreis der Stadt Meersburg (2012), with critics placing her in the august tradition of Paul Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann. She has been invited to many international literary festivals and exchanges, been granted a literary residencies in Helsinki and Sydney, and her fiction and poetry has been widely anthologized.
but I won’t say a thing about the way the trees tremble in the light, nor about the trees themselves. not a word about the beech at the doctor’s place while her daughter is dying upstairs, not a word about the foxglove tree in the backyard, where you and I sit out late every night and act like the doctor’s daughter is real only in the poems I write. of the trembling of the trees in the light I will give nothing away but the very tips, the tips of the trees that sway in the wind and the branches of needles always green. I will act like only that flickering, fevered light embroidered into the tips of the fir trees is real. but not their trunks crowding beneath, never those slender shadows, the forest, the trees themselves.

it’s certain you can’t stay here. certain too that you’ll never get out. you’re stuck here for certain, not one for travel nor one for leaving, though one day you’ll have to go but that’s still so far off just as everything is far off that stays hidden:

those old familiar pains in your head again and the fact they won’t disappear, not at home and not in the south that stays hidden too, no matter how far away you go looking. no odds, south is always south. south dressed to impress. south in the wind, at the wide open window. a child.

it is certain that it will all still be there. even after sleeping in again, forgetting you as I slept, then forgetting myself and the late-film from yesterday night, and all those things that went missing without trace the day before yesterday, the minute I looked away: knife, fork and scissors and the light from the fridge and the salt from the bread, and the plot, and the thread, the smell of my own body, and even that nothing was certain, that of all things was still there.

I’ve been told there is a place for all vanished things, like the old varieties of apple clowns and gods and among them even that good God of Manhattan Karl-Marx-Stadt and Constantinopole Benares and Bombay and the names of too many brown coal villages fetch up there, I’ve been told, in the thick of the silver fir wood that swallows every sound wave, the place is, or so I’ve been told, not marked on any kind of map.

now that I’m gone, everything comes easy. wednesday someone selling eggs, thursday catching fish. friday there’s a power cut, later on the dot the alarm is set. oh yes. no one says ‘sat’day’, except for me, and I am not there. one day someone misses me, then buys himself a treat. everything comes easy. each creature tucked in at night. me apart. but that comes –
here is the passage from the street back to winter 1938. the small, inconspicuous curtain of history: a child-size gate in the iron railings, six steps down to the dried-up river-bed close to the zoo. waiting two days, having to stand, with their stars, and being inspected\(^1\) in broad daylight. then finally off to the station, into the trucks, that’s when the first fell like flies, like chaff. and later again the little wood of beech + beech + snow. that is where this story ends but here is the passage, here’s where it all starts again STOP

//

when the loudspeakers are silent, the spotlights have been dimmed, when the last chorus has died away behind the scenes of history when the actors’ uniforms have been hung up and the cleaners have gone home, when the auditorium stands quiet in the half-light that’s when you get back up on the stage and say after me: the whole thing was not real. and no one here came to any harm. say after me: the whole thing was not STOP

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not to be old and not to be young, but old enough to be several things at once: Ulrike and Almut, a great beast that walks upright a strange beast, that can talk. amazed at the beast that can say ‘I’, that can remember. to be hungry like a beast, an insatiable hunger for simple things like ‘tree’ like ‘father’ and ‘mother’, like ‘you’ and ‘me’. not to grasp all kinds of things, but to be old enough no longer to feel ashamed. to be afraid of illnesses and parents getting smaller, their laughter

\(^1\) On 10 November 1938 in Leipzig several hundred Jews were gathered up in the walled-in riverbed of the Parthe and displayed to the townsfolk. From there 550 Jewish men were taken to the railway station and loaded onto trains destined for Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen. The memorial stone on the banks of the river Parthe is made of green diabase, ‘diabasis’ being Greek for “passage, transit”.

in the alder behind the house like children. to become lighter and lighter and blow with the wind in any direction. to put down roots in any town. to be a tree behind mother and father’s house. to have no name, no longer to say: ‘I am’. to be wood in a table, where someone sits.

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this is a lullaby for all those who resist when it’s time to go to sleep. a lullaby for all those who put up a fight, when somebody says: lights out, no more talking, my tired friends, in the bars all the chairs have been stacked on the tables, the billboards hum as the posters change, cameras film the empty bank foyers, all the night kiosks are alight, all the night buses purr through the illuminated cathedral of the city. we are talking in pictures. but do we have any idea how ‘darkness’ is written? my tired, my night-blind friends, we’re waiting for good news, though good news is rare by day, we’re waiting for two or three of those good, humming dreams, four peace treaties, five apples in deep sleep, we are waiting for six cathedrals and for the seven fat cows, eight quiet hours full of sleep, we’re waiting for nine friends gone missing, we’re counting our fingers. we’re still resisting. we won’t go to sleep.

Karen Leeder is a writer, translator and academic. Since 1993 she has taught German at New College, Oxford and is Professor of Modern German Literature there. Ten volumes of prose have appeared over the last decade, including Brecht, Michael Krüger, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Wilhelm Schmid, but she specializes in poetry, most recently: Volker Braun, Rubble Flora: Selected Poems, with David Constantine (commended in the Popescu Translation Prize 2015) and Michael Krüger, Last Day of the Year: Selected Poems. She has served on the boards of PEN, the British Centre for Literary Translation and the Poetry Trust. Her translation of Schmid’s High on Low won four prizes in the USA (2014–5); she won the Schlegel Tieck Prize for Evelyn Schlag’s Selected Poems in 2005 and the Stephen Spender Prize in 2013 for her translation of Durs Grünbein.
This deceptively simple story has three main trajectories: there is the story of a boy growing up, the story of old ways of life being replaced by modernity and the story of a refugee.

Set on Crete in the years leading up to World War I, the plot revolves around Hassan, a Cretan Muslim with Turkish/Anatolian ancestry, who is a young boy when violence between Christian and Muslim Cretans forces his family from the village where they have lived peacefully for about 15 generations. The story follows Hassan’s adventures as he is forced to flee from place to place, burying most of his family along the way.

Hassan can’t understand why people are saying he’s a Turk, and cannot accept that Crete is not his home. The tragic events are peppered with amusing and poignant childhood anecdotes as Hassan is also on another journey into manhood.

The book is a tribute to the tenacity of immigrants stripped of all but the clothes they are standing in. Despite its heart-breaking reality it is never short of human compassion as it shows the real drama of ordinary people trapped in cataclysmic political events and turned into refugees who suddenly belong nowhere.

The forced population exchanges between Greece and Turkey after World War I uprooted families from lands they had inhabited for hundreds of years, almost erasing the Greeks from Anatolia and largely stripping the Islands between Greece and Turkey of their ethnic diversity. In most cases, the only basis for deciding who should go where was the religion they practised – a haunting shadow of current events in the Middle East.

Through the vivid characters in the story, the author shows how perceptions of national/religious identity were different before World War I. The novel is a valuable piece of regional history which sheds some light on how older, pluralistic societies, that had been peaceful for years, came to be wracked by sectarian violence as the era of the nation state approached. In that sense, it directly relates to the current wars and refugee crises that are rocking the Middle East.

This novel was the author’s first book of three to be based on the diaries of a Cretan refugee who died in Ayvalik, Turkey, the same town that Ahmet Yorulmaz lived in. It has been reprinted at least five times in Turkey and has also been translated and published in Greek and Albanian. In a conference held on the population exchanges at Oxford University in 1998, it was recognized as the first and only novel written by a Turk about ‘the exchange’.

Through a translators’ collective, Paula Darwish (translator-champion of this book) is in contact with a Chinese translator and publisher who are interested in translating the novel from English to Chinese.

‘Children of War concerns the uprooting and forcible evacuation of Turks from the island of Crete as seen through the story of Aynakis Hasan otherwise known as Hasanakis under what is defined in the dictionary as “the exchange of populations”…. This was the first and remains the only novel on the issue of evacuations to Turkey following the Turkish Greek War.’ Cumhuriyet

‘Like Dido Sotirou’s Farewell to Anatolia, this novel is full of emotion and feelings and seems to have been written as a response. It deserves the greatest of prizes.’ Fakir Baykurt

Ahmet Yorulmaz (1932–2013) was a descendant of Cretan refugees who moved to Ayvalik in Turkey, and throughout his life insisted he was, above all, a Cretan. As well as being a novelist, he was a journalist and also translated a good deal of contemporary Greek literature into Turkish. Many of his poems and stories were published in literary journals during his lifetime. In Ayvalik there is a park named after Ahmet Yorulmaz. It looks over the sea to Crete, where his ancestors came from.

Original title: Savaşın Çocukları
Language: Turkish
Length: 143 pages
Genre: Literary fiction
Original publisher: Remzi Kitabevi, 1997
Rights holder: Onk Agency
Other languages sold: Greek and Albanian
LBF location: c/o English PEN, Literary Translation Centre
I'm not sure why I was given the nickname 'Hassan, the mirror', to be honest. It might have been because of my immaculately polished boots, smart khaki trousers and walking cane, or maybe the red fez I always sported on my head. Maybe it was the cravat carefully fastened under my collar with a long pin and inlaid with sparkling stones, or perhaps the ring on my little finger set with a shimmering claret jewel that never failed to draw attention? Could it have been the ornate and elegant gold pendant watch that always hung from my waistcoat? No. Somehow, I don't really think it could have been for any of these reasons; especially when I compare myself to other grand figures that had been around before me, such as the so called 'fragrant Mr Nail', who bathed his customers' feet in special lotions brought from Europe. He used to light up the carnation in his lapel with tiny bulbs connected to a battery in his pocket by a hidden wire. At that time, there were no gas or kerosene lamps lighting the streets and when the great man passed by, the Greek women would lean out of the window to signal to each other that 'fragrant Mr Nail' was on his way. So in that case, could it have been my neat moustache, swarthy skin and good height that led to the nickname? I just can't work it out.

Maybe it was supposed to mean mirror-like but in any case, my real name is Hassan, so forget about the other ones. Don't be fooled into thinking I had been around before me, such as the so called 'fragrant Mr Nail', who bathed his customers' feet in special lotions brought from Europe. He used to light up the carnation in his lapel with tiny bulbs connected to a battery in his pocket by a hidden wire. At that time, there were no gas or kerosene lamps lighting the streets and when the great man passed by, the Greek women would lean out of the window to signal to each other that 'fragrant Mr Nail' was on his way.

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'Hello, my boy,' he used to say in Greek.

In fact, he always greeted me and the family in Greek although we also heard him speaking French. We heard that he was French and we knew he didn't really speak Greek. If you ask me whether he knew any Turkish I'm afraid I might not be able to give the right answer. I always resented the fact that we didn't really know Turkish which must have been our original language, our mother tongue. The sultans scattered us here like seeds but they didn't take into account our language and future. How effective could a few Turkish teachers sent over from Istanbul really be? What sort of teachers were they anyway? There was one in particular, called Master Ismail, who was renowned – but only for his ignorance. There were numerous stories about him and one of the most popular ones concerned Master Ismail's friends who presumed that because he was a geography teacher he would be knowledgeable, and therefore consulted him on important matters. One day his friend and fellow teacher Nasip, asked him which direction the Libyan city of Derne was from Crete. Master Ismail immediately replied, 'In the North.'

'But dear Master Ismail,' replied Nasip, 'Everyone says that Greece, I mean the place they call Hellenica, is in the North.'

Master Ismail was not happy with this response.

'Are you telling me about this? Perhaps you think I don't know what I'm talking about?'

'Oh, dear Sir. If you say it's in the North, that's where it is, but can you just tell me where exactly is the North?' continued Nasip.
'Let me explain this in a way that you can’t fail to understand... On which side is Turkey?' asked Master Ismail.

'To the North sir.'

'And what language is spoken in Derne?' continued Master Ismail.

'Arabic,' replied Mr Nesip.

'And Arabic and Turkish are related, are they not?'

'True sir.'

'And which language is spoken in Turkey?'

'Turkish of course!'

Master Ismail’s reply was interesting, ‘In that case, how can you possibly think that Derne is in the South!'

The African city to the south of Crete was apparently to the North just because Turkish and Arabic were spuriously related languages. Maybe the story was a bit exaggerated but no doubt it was made up to poke fun at all the incompetent teachers sent from Istanbul, festooned in their robes and turbans. Nevertheless, the overall situation was far from good.

I’m still preoccupied by this language issue. If I tell you that even the biggest braggarts amongst us only knew about fifty words of Turkish, don’t think badly of me. Especially as the number of us who could read and write could be counted on two hands anyway. I’ll try to count the ones I knew: there was the coffee merchant Mr Mehmet Macit, the leader of the Dervish lodge, Mr Mustafa Tevfik, Mr Mehmet Behcet, the shoemaker Mr Nesimi, the tanner Mr Ibrahim, Vladimiros the Greek printer and newsagent who helped me so much when I was growing up, Behcet Bey who worked at the Joint Emigration Commission preparing documents for those going back to the Motherland, Mr Baha who owned the photographer’s in Chania, and I also seem to recall another merchant called Mr Celal. They were the people who knew Turkish really well and were able to write. Apart from these and a few others, the rest of us knew about ten to fifteen words and there was a further small number who could maybe muster up to fifty at best. Take Mr Behcet, assistant to the Swiss head of the Emigration Commission, and one of the few who really knew his Turkish: people said he had been educated in Istanbul and Paris. Whereas the rest of us would say, ‘Get here’, he would say, ‘Come over here.’ As for the old Greek printer Vladimiros, he had picked up Turkish really well when he was a young man learning his trade in the Tahtakale district of Istanbul. Instead of pronouncing Tahtakale as it’s written, he used to pronounce it ‘Taht el Kal a’. He was one of the moderate Greeks and I benefitted a lot from his great mind as well as his knowledge of Turkish.

I almost forgot to add the most important thing – our religion. The one thing that kept Cretan Turks from being paralysed by the fear of individual or mass murder was our religion. Our villages were blockaded, our brothers and sisters were killed, and the priests and schools subjected us to a ‘Greekification’ campaign, but they all came to nothing. When we were in mourning, we wore black like the Greeks, and our mother tongue had become Greek but our religion ensured we never forgot our Turkishness. So much so, that if someone asked a Cretan Turk, in Greek of course, ‘Mehmet, are you a Turk?’ the typical reply would come, in very poignant Greek,

‘I swear in the name of Mary that I am a Turk!'

Paula Darwish studied Turkish language and literature with Middle Eastern history at SOAS, and also at the Bosphorous University in Istanbul, graduating in 1997 with a First Class Honours Degree. Darwish is passionate about bringing Turkish literature, historical and political writing to a wider audience. In 2013 she launched into full-time work as a freelance translator. She is also a professional musician and has been performing folk music from Turkey and the Middle East for over 15 years. In 2015 she was selected to attend the CUNDA Workshops for Translators of Turkish Literature, sponsored by the Turkish Ministry of Culture and organised by the Bosphorous University’s Translation Studies Department. Darwish is also a member of the Collective of Women Writers and Translators and the North West Translator’s Network.
In the impoverished lower levels of a towering Manchurian city, under a chemical sky three centuries into the future, an unnamed protagonist writes a memoir. She is the only child of a prostitute who was too poor or too proud to endow her daughter with the desirable genetic manipulations that have become the norm, affecting everything from social status to insurance premiums.

But more disturbingly, as we soon discover, our protagonist was the victim of a cruel treatment in her childhood, a treatment which saved her life and blighted it at the same time. She cannot taste or smell, lives with constant pain and coldness – and hasn’t aged a day since the treatment was carried out.

Our focus falls on the practitioner of this treatment; the enigmatic medicine woman, iasmitine. Through an encounter with a dying and professionally ruined European researcher, the protagonist begins to unravel this woman’s secrets and delves into a world of terrorism, degradation and bitter political intrigue.

This world is viewed through the spiritualist filter of the protagonist’s perspective and marked by the memory of her senses. It is dark, bewildering and, as with all great sci-fi, a harrowing reflection of our own reality.


It imagines a future of widespread poverty, elusive terrorist cults, genetic warfare and deadly pandemics, presenting themes including innocence, loneliness, globalisation and mortality. The novel questions the stability of global powers, warns of ecological disaster and explores the suffering and resentment that give rise to extremism. Dufour’s style has been widely compared to that of Marguerite Yourcenar and her focus on the disenfranchised members of a vast and unsympathetic society undoubtedly also give the story echoes of Victor Hugo – yet set in a world with all the sublime cyber-punk credentials of Philip K. Dick.

The author’s obvious love of science fiction, combined with an ever-increasing and genre-transcending socio-political relevance, gives the novel a fantastically broad appeal. Not only does it deserve to be introduced to a wider audience, it also has the potential to be a great success.

‘The darkness is absolute, the writing is dazzling and behind the words lies a sophisticated narrative structure.’ Le monde des livres

‘All the qualities of a great novel.’ actusf.com

‘A Taste for Immortality is the literary wake-up slap we all need now and then – we could do with a few more slaps like that.’ scif-universe.com

‘It’s dark, very dark, but what a treat.’ cafardcosmique.com

Catherine Dufour cut her teeth as a published novelist on the comic fantasy series Quand les dieux buvaient (When the Gods Drank) and her current bibliography stretches from science-fiction and fantasy, to historical non-fiction and a career guide for young girls who don’t want to be princesses. Aside from numerous awards for A Taste for Immortality, Dufour also won the first ever Prix Merlin in 2002 for her Pratchett-esque fantasy novel Blanche Neige et les lance-missiles (Snow White and the Missile Launchers). Her short story, ‘Vergiss Mein Nicht’, was translated into English in 2012 by Michael Shreve and published in the literary annual Unstuck. Her name is regularly mentioned among the best science-fiction writers in France today.
So I got my swimming-sphere, with oxygen paste included. I spent hours in it making rings of foam Chrysanthemums. My mother’s ruthless brand of love seemed to end where the tepid water began; the weight of her guilt gave way to ghostly lightness, the shadow of the towers disappeared behind my circular Gardens. If I’ve ever been happy, it was there and then. I used to carry on floating in my dreams. I started to sleep better. Reassured by my peaceful nights, happy to see that the sweat on her back and the blood in her bruises washed over me in baby blue dreams, my mother’s spirits also appeared lifted.

Back then, water posed an even thornier problem than now. It wasn’t scarce, it was dirty. The water table had gradually collected every single pollutant from the previous centuries. Pumped up from thirty metres, it was packed with ancient pesticides. Pumped up from a hundred and fifty, it required nanofiltration, chlorination and uv radiation before it could be used. The water in the swimming-spheres was only microfiltered; it was saturated with malathion, chlorpyrifos, lindane, lead, mercury and cadmium. I splashed around in it for three months, I was hospitalised the fourth. The prognosis was hopeless – there was nothing they could do for heavy metal poisoning.

I’ll spare you the details; the wailing families smashing open the blue bubbles, the children dying in the corridors of crowded hospitals, the dramatic court proceedings over this umpteenth water scandal. My mother watched over me tirelessly. She rubbed my belly when it stiffened from the cramps, methodically applied the pain relief patches, scrutinised the monitors with relentless severity, mopped up after me and fell asleep as I convulsed. Determined to win or die in her doomed struggle, as pale and cold as the sterile lacquer on the hospital walls, she was fading away in time with me and resolutely shrivelling at my bedside. Her hands were icy against my own. For the first time it made me angry at her: couldn’t she be happy that she’d soon be free, instead of swamping my agony in her own regret? Dying didn’t bother me any more than living, all I wanted was for her to give me a reason to be pleased with myself. I would have liked to imagine her living a better life without me, with fewer money worries, fewer clients and absolutely no more human-furniture gigs. I told myself that without me to burden her, she might find a different job in a different city, or another partner and, one day, have another child – one well dressed in Family and shod with deep Roots. But this stubborn woman had clearly resolved to stick with me. It seemed obvious that I was doing everything wrong, that I gave off misery like a bad smell. That whole time, as I lurched between physical and emotional torment, she smiled endlessly. With a courage that drew Purrs of admiration from the medical staff, she wiped my forehead and hummed her tender old tunes, ‘veiled moon, Bird in the mist.’ Then, as soon as she thought I was asleep, her smile tied itself in knots and she began to tremor, ‘stained with blood,’ or, ‘I miss you truly.’ These ditties brought no joy to my half-sleep. Frankly, I would have happily strangled her. Eventually my condition worsened and I slipped into the cold shadow that comes before death. Who can say what strange sun, rising behind a monstrous back, casts that darkness with so many shades of black. I saw mesmerising glimmers. Frankly, I would have happily strangled her. Eventually my condition worsened and I slipped into the cold shadow that comes before death. Who can say what strange sun, rising behind a monstrous back, casts that darkness with so many shades of black. I saw mesmerising glimmers.

I can imagine the scene precisely: some machine or other tells my mother it’s all over. I was now nothing but a piece of flesh, soon to cease self-ventilating. It was all the hospital staff were waiting for to free up the bed. So my mother gathered her songs, her smile and the poem by mao haojan that she had been reading out loud to me. She got up, brushed down her crease-proof skirt, turned away the death certificate without signing it, tore off the patches and sensors that covered me like so many Vermin, took me in her arms and went straight to iasmitine.

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Let me introduce you to that terrible woman who was the cause of everything.

Physically, she was a genetically mismatched little creature, predominantly half-maori. She had fine, Olive skin, a round face, a thin nose, beautiful dark eyes and naturally glossy lips. Her black hair curled around her wrinkled forehead and her cheekbones flowed into jowls. Her body, straight and thick-set, had better endured the passage of time. For me, of course, her fifty years made her an antiquity but, despite this great age, she was pleasing to the eye. Her asian elegance was nothing exceptional, but the majesty with which she held her head, the roundness of her nape particularly, was almost syrian. Something far off, unknown, african perhaps, peered out from the depths of those calm waters.
Officially, she was a naturologist and allergy specialist – which meant she dosed her patients with various powder solutions and Parasites to numb them, then stuffed them full of green clay to purge them. Her office, spacious and glacial, overflowed with certificates and strange machines: a pedoscope and an mri, an ophthalmic scanner and an old-fashioned reflex-gyro made from cream mineral-plastic. Along the walls an impressive botanotech... well, impressed. She practised iridology, aromatherapy, phytotherapy, oligotherapy, and delighted her patients by providing them with genuine Radish, Cabbage and Mandarin oils. At that time, every floor of every tower had its own lovingly-tended little Vegetable Garden and ours was essentially funded by iasmitine (I'll tell you later about the woman who looked after it). Make no mistake, iasmitine’s certificates were official and her treatments effective. Underestimating iasmitine’s effectiveness was the mistake that everyone in this story made.

At the back of this allergist’s office, another door opened. You passed through it and entered another world. In this second office iasmitine carried out, how should I put it... a kind of charade for the benefit of patients who weren’t sufficiently reassured by medical science. She played the role of a psychic, a priestess, of anything that jumbled the objective abilities of nature with the specious delirium of dreams. She didn't practice any particular cult; I’d seen her weave together buddhism, hinduism, jainism, zoroastrianism, confucianism and taoism without the slightest of cares. Her spiel rolled out ancestors, a single god with many faces, whirling spheres, an endless wheel, eternal impermanence and ten million demons. I liked when she told me that the pink of a sunset was the reflected blood of a god, suspended between the earth and the sun. In any case, she knew how to set a scene; her second office was dumbfounding. A temple of hazy rituals demanding endless embellishment, it was swathed in symbols and draped its lies in an orgy of splendour. Purple Silk sprawled along the walls, the crimson cushions flamed like braziers on heavy vermillion rugs. From this side, the door was coated with scarlet varnish and on it were painted two grimacing spirits, one black and one red, brandishing sabre and axe with eyes like brass bells. The inevitable spring flowed by the inevitable Bird cage and the air smelt of every Incense imaginable. Candles and scented Paper burned by the pallet load, coils of smoke overflowed from Incense burners hanging from the ceiling on silver chains, you could barely see two steps ahead.

I was the only one nonplussed by this room. Indifferent to so much mystery, I juggled with the bones of oracles, pulled faces at the embroidered dragons and hid my stash of stewed Arbutus Berries beneath the alter where they rotted. You see, when iasmitine looked after me, her first office was out of bounds. But in the second I played the role of spirit familiar, of household god or kitsune and almost nothing was forbidden.

Now that you’ve seen iasmitine as a particular kind of well turned-out woman, on the rise after a troubled career and now a somewhat ridiculous palm-reader with her pythian knickknacks, it’s time you tried on my child’s eyes. Without those, you’ll never see her as anything but a medicine woman from the 42nd floor. She fooled all the adults.

Sam Nagele studied French at the University of Leeds. He completed an MA in Translating Popular Culture at City University in September 2015. He currently works with Deluxe Media, providing freelance consistency checks for film and television subtitles. He helped to create subtitles for a film produced by the London Film Academy and has translated transcripts for a documentary about a group of female student-mechanics in Burkina Faso. In 2015 he worked on English translations of the magazine *Charlie Hebdo* following the attacks in January.