1

On December 11, 1942, a child was born to the Breunn family of Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, England. His name was T. Edward Breunn – and that's all we know. As most authors and publishers would prefer of their translators, Mr Bruenn managed to make himself so invisible as to have left nearly no evidence of his passage through this world. What little has been recorded is due only to the diligence of some librarian back in the age of paper. He or she made note of the above details, and no others, on the original, analogue, card-catalogue entries for his little-known English version of Kafka's *The Trial* (1981). Later, presumably, these entries were transcribed with neither comment nor correction and entered into the great digital record in the sky.

I can find no record of his death. We'll just have to assume the best.

But, the thing is, I'm working on my own translation of Robbe-Grillet's *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, and Breunn is responsible for the only extant edition in English. And Breunn's isn't bad, credit where it's due, but I'm not so sure he could actually speak French. I think I can do better. I was born in a trilingual household, you see – French, English and money – so I'm as comfortable in each as in my own skin.

Which is to say, *mostly*. Better, being able to speak money fluently means there aren't many other languages that won't yield to you with just a whisper in the tongue of tongues. I'm also conversant with Latin, Russian, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Icelandic . . . Take my word for it.

How, you may ask, can I say that Breunn's *Souvenirs* isn't bad when he didn't know the language? Well, funny story. There are a fuck ton of competing theories out there about translating, from Walter Benjamin to Hilaire Belloc to Paul Ricoeur to Susan Sontag to Hannah Arendt to R. Pevear to AS Wohl to L. Davis to J. Malcolm to every person who's ever read a book. But let me sum up: nobody can agree what makes a good translation; nobody can agree what makes a bad translation; everybody agrees that it would be ideal if everyone could read the original work in the original language; everybody knows this is impossible.

Beyond or alongside these widely acknowledged (by translators) competitive dogmas, the history of translation is fraught with eccentrics, frauds and prodigiously talented amateurs, without which much of the world's literature would remain inaccessible to most of the world's readers. Lin Shu couldn't read a word of any foreign language, but in the early twentieth century translated something like two hundred works of Western literature – Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Dickens and so on – into classical Chinese, on the basis of a plot paraphrase from a polyglot friend. Simon Leys claimed that Lin Shu somehow managed, through a superior command of style in his native tongue, to improve in many cases on the originals. He's an outlier, I think

we can agree. Also that's not translation so much as, you know, writing.

The Torah's third-century BCE translation into Greek famously took seventy (or seventy-two, depending on who's counting, though even this has been challenged, notably in 1684 by Humphry Hody, a name I did not make up) Alexandria-based scholars to render from the original Hebrew, despite which or possibly because of which they still got a lot of stuff wrong, with repercussions that reverberate still among the religiously disposed. The Vulgate or Latin translation of the Bible, produced mostly by St Jerome in the late fourth century CE and later revised in 1592 by a troupe of performing angels, introduced – right at the top, I might add – a mistake that has slandered the entirely innocent apple (is any fruit entirely innocent, though?) down through the centuries. It was a fig, people. If you don't believe me, consult Northrop Frye's *The Great Code*. And don't even get me started on the King James Version, another translation by committee that proves . . . I don't know what it proves, exactly. Because for every grievous error perpetrated by that Jacobean assemblage, any number of foundational turns of phrase – without which cliché-mongers would be bereft of such succulents as 'a drop in the bucket', 'a fly in the ointment' and 'a labour of love' – would have gone missing forever from the collective minds of anglophone civilisation.

Sometimes a really outstanding author whose book might otherwise be considered untranslatable (though, as noted above, there's a sense in which all books are untranslatable) is fluent in several languages and can oversee a given translation him or herself, as was the case in, e.g., *Ulysses*' French

rendering, though 'oversee' is maybe an unfortunately ableist term considering Joyce was mostly blind at that point. But that's as rare as Joyce himself was rare. His interest in all languages or in surpassing language itself (using language), particularly in *Finnegans Wake*, while possibly a doomed undertaking, incorporates translation into the writing, which is sort of the opposite of what Lin Shu did.

On the antipodal pole, may I present Constance Garnett, whose Englished versions of Russian classics you likely grew up reading, assuming you read Russian classics growing up, and which are objectively terrible as translations, but are responsible in large part for popularising those authors (Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in particular) with the English-speaking public. So while it's true that if you read her version of *Anna Karenina* you are reading Constance Garnett as much as – if not more than – you are reading Tolstoy, at least you are palpating Tolstoy's bones, and there now exist much better, or at least more accurate, translations of his work for your edification, or whatever you read books for.

Xavier Hadley, a much lesser-known light than Ms Garnett, possibly because he chose only to translate into Scottish Gaelic (his best known work is *Foirm na n-Urrnuidheadh*, a version of John Knox's *Book of Common Order*), had the curious habit of sketching his first drafts on dried peas with a tiny brush made from the plucked hairs of a common housefly, without the use of a microscope. It will perhaps tell you something about the special nature of the community of professional translators (we have our own magazine!) that Hadley is considered by some a bit of a show-off, but on the whole sound in his approach.

It boils down to this: you try to get down as best you can what the writer has written while also reproducing the way the writer wrote it – but in another language. With all its different rhythms, idioms, vocabularies. You try to make the reader reading in the target language believe they're reading what the original writer wrote, had the original writer written in the reader's language: a magic trick seldom executed with apodictic success. Howlers are as ineluctable as the modality of the visible; but one can on occasion by careful and patient application of the intellect, if that's the word I want, find elegant solutions to problems of inelegance. That's the shit I live for.

There's no money in it, so it's good I don't need money. The crucial aspect, from my tendentious POV, is that you love the writer you're translating. The ones I love are precisely the ones who call themselves, or get themselves called, *untranslatable*. The stylists, the weirdos, the outsiders and innovators. Which makes and has made them extremely difficult. But when it's an *ardorous* task, it's never *arduous*. Hold your applause, please.

If I've done my job right, I will have made myself vanish as entirely as Mr Breunn's *prénom*. The writer is, and ought to be, the star of the show. The translator ought to be, in the best sense of the word, invisible. Does that bother me, you ask? Let's say it doesn't bother me anymore. It may even be that I've come to enjoy that part of the job most.

Shit. There's the doorbell. Hold on while I . . . oh, it's my upstairs neighbour. She's never home. I suppose I'll have to – socialise.

2

Juno. It is Juno, right? Juno Temple? I think I saw you in a movie by . . . I can't remember who by. A well-known director. You were fantastic. I'm sure you're always fantastic.

Anyway. Please come in. Call me Van. Short for Vanessa. Or just V. Make yourself at home. My etc. is your etc. That's a Tracey Emin. Next to it is a Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Astonishing, no?

I draw your attention to the series of Francesca Woodman prints on the other wall. I'm obsessed with her. One of the reasons I bought this apartment – but I expect you're thirsty.

Might I suggest a round of Singani Sours? They're quite *séduisant*, and, you know, small translation presses can use all the product-placement cash they can wrangle, in this fallen world of ours.

2 oz singani 63
.75 oz lemon juice
.75 oz agave
1 egg white
2 dashes angostura bitters

dry shake first four ingredients, then shake again with ice. strain into a glass and top with bitters.

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Please, sit. I'll bring your drink. Frank Gehry designed that sofa. And the two chairs. They're not especially comfortable, but I adore that shade of violet.

À *propos de bottes*, are you hungry? I've got some snack-type items that would go well with the drinks. The book you're looking at is a novel by Alain Robbe-Grillet, noted writer, filmmaker and pervert. It's an English translation of his *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*. The title's been rendered as *Recollections of the Golden Triangle*, which is solid. It's a solid translation. You're welcome to borrow it. The novel – we'll get to that soon. A fair representative of the so-called school of the *nouveau roman*, in its decadent phase. Not that I'm much for schools of literature. Wouldn't we all rather be taken on our own terms, as individuals? If any of us qualify as individuals. I probably qualify even less than you.

That said, I admire many of the *nouveau roman* writers. Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Maurice Blanchot, Robert Pinget, Claude Simon: all wonderful. Some of the radical textual experiments that followed – Georges Perec's lipogrammatic *La disparition*, for example, where he writes without using the letter 'e' – to say nothing of the more outré Oulipo efforts – are less interesting to me. *La disparition* would have been amusing to translate, though. Gilbert Adair got there before me. (And Ian Monk before him, though his version has been sitting in a drawer for going on fifty years now. What, did you think translators don't suffer the same heartbreak as authors, sometimes, drinking themselves to sleep over the work the world may never see?)

In my defence, I was two years old when the Adair version was published, so could hardly toss my hat into the ring. A

Void is Adair's title in English. It's not as good as the original, but what is?

Are you in a hurry or anything? The reason I ask, you're in a posish to do me a huge favour, should you be so reclined – that's a joke because you picked the couch, that is to say, the *recliner*. Which was the smart choice! Most comfortable piece of furniture in my under-furnished place. Gosh, I don't know why I'm so nervous all of a sudden.

You're an actress, right? I mean, you *act*. That's what you do, and thus what or who you are. I've just finished writing what, for lack of a better word, we'll call a book. It might even be a translation, or a kind of translation, at least in the sense that every book is a translation of the writer's experience into language, that is to say into words, which are little vehicles of sense that you can carry from one place to another like, um, dried peas. What I'd like to do is read what I've written out loud, to you. Right now. I've signed a contract with a rather unusual publisher, and before I turn in the manuscript, I'd feel better if I had some feedback from a real, live actual person, which, I have been assured by people who understand these things, you are.

Really? You would? That's so . . . kind! Assuming you actually exist and are in my loft at this moment, which is never something I take for granted, for reasons that will I hope become clear – that is just . . . very kind of you. Another Singani Sour? Paper ain't free.

How the wind doth blow! That glass is supposed to be hurricane-proof, though how it'll hold up if a car comes flying off the streets – as doesn't seem beyond possible – I can but guess. Skeins of fat rain lashing the wet streets, lashing too

the traffic lights and street lamps and gingko trees. What's the word Epictetus used to describe the faculty of volition? Prohairesis. That's the bugger. How will you face the end of the world? If you're a follower of Epictetus, with equanimity. If you're not, and I'm not, we'll find out when we get there. Dunno if the end of the world is nigh, exactly, but it's far from far.

I'll start reading, then.

3

A metaphor is a ladder to the truth but is not itself true. Think on that while I give the teacher a blowjob under his desk.

On we go. Not down but not explicitly up. Only on. A direction without direction, uncompassed, recursively discursive: a spiral in a glass globe.

Est aliquid prodisse tenus.

4

That last bit was Latin. Do you know Latin? So few people study it anymore. I mean, to be fair, there's not much interest in live languages, never mind dead ones, in the early stages of the education of most children. It's not useful, and therefore not important. Also, fyi, the blowjob was metaphorical. The teacher, the desk: metaphors.

But the ladder is real. And I'm about to pull it away. Promise me that you'll fall. That sounds dramatic, doesn't it? Like 'Ooh, scary, V. Books can't hurt anyone. Least of all the kind of books that *you* like.'

But seriously – you have to promise.

Too much throat-clearing, do you think? Too much mere exordium? Am I writing cheques that my perfect ass can't cash? It *is* perfect, by the way. Anyhoo. Better now just to slice straight in to the dark meat of the narrative. Except it's not really a narrative, per se. I hope you're not expecting a story in the trad sense. We'll come back to the beginning at the end, because that's how the spinning world works. There's a way of looking at things that suggests I spend my whole life dressing for dinner in the jungle. But that's just philosophy. Let's continue.

5

I am younger by two minutes than my identical twin, but I have always been the extrovert. Angelica was criminally shy throughout childhood and adolescence, a quiet, bookish girl, whereas I was the gregarious, noisy flirt daring the boys on the playground to kiss me: smacking them silly when they were too scared to try and sillier still when they weren't. My mother loved both of us, she said, but all things being equal – and they were, in this case – *me* she actually *liked*. That's how it felt, anyway. I could apply to them for a less unilateral reading of those years – my parents are alive, and together – but we rarely talk. I live in New York City, they live in Paris. Different time zones, different sensibilities, and my father's slipping into senility, which makes me all squirmy. I never know what to do with sick people. I don't have any of the feelings you're supposed to have: pity, sorrow, anger, indifference, orange soda, yellow-blue vase, black lacquer cabinet. I'm only uneasy.

I don't think they've noticed that we aren't really on speaking terms. My current standoffishness set against my past standoffishness wouldn't rate a complaint from my parents, especially now that I'm no longer under their

purview. A different matter growing up. Growing up I was a handful.

I started smoking at twelve, drinking at thirteen, fucking at fourteen, and spent my *lycée* years talking my way into and out of trouble. At seventeen I wanted to be an actor. A famous French director was casting a part that called for a lot of nudity. I had no problem with a lot of nudity. I'm an exhibitionist. I've always liked the way my body looks. No harm in that. I should have gotten the part. I'm a good actor, and I was, modesty aside, a knockout. But I didn't get the part.

Angelique de Saxe, née Angelica Salomon, got the part. My sister accompanied me to the casting because she followed me everywhere in those days. Sure, like a little dog. Or not so little, because we were both tall, but still – a dog. A gangly dog with big tits. The director, an old lecher, liked what he saw in me, but liked more what he saw in Angelica, sitting cross-legged on the floor in the waiting area in her school uniform reading a book. A *certain virginal quality*, the paedophile called it, and after ten minutes of pretending not to want to read for the part, Angelica read for the part. You know the rest. The *succès de scandale*, the raves, the blockbuster films, the modelling contracts, the red carpet events, the awards. The glamour, the fame. Hers, and yet – but for a happenstance – mine!

Did Angelica have a certain virginal quality, after all? Of course she did. She was a virgin. I could not asseverate that designation, nor would I have wanted to, but I certainly could have acted the part, and would have, had she not followed me to the audition and stolen my life.

Here is a picture of the statue of Winged Victory in the Louvre: