



Ho Lin

Words Without Borders: The Best of the First Ten Years

"All anthologies are unfinished and very private attempts to compose a song in many tongues."

- The editors of *Words Without Borders*

Words Without Borders' mission to gather non-English contemporary literature for an English-reading audience has always been akin to capturing the ocean in a teacup. Still, the journal has always acknowledged the exigencies of translation, as well as the political and cultural implications that stem from featuring (or not featuring) a particular work, and has done yeoman's work in its first decade of existence, consistently supplying an eclectic range of material. The organization's latest anthology, *Words Without Borders: The Best of the First Ten Years*, is a fittingly dense tribute to this "everything and the kitchen sink" approach as it gathers up over 30 stories, poems and essays from points of the globe that typically aren't covered in English Lit 101.

If nothing else, the *Words Without Borders* editors can't be accused of lacking *chutzpah* or a sense of playfulness: the first three issues of the magazine featured work from Iraq, Iran and North Korea (Dubuya's Axis of Evil). One finds that same friskiness in this anthology, where a devastating fictionalized account of one of the most famous atrocities from the War in Afghanistan (Mohammad Hussain Mohammad's "Dasht-e Leili") is followed up with a story in which nothing more is at stake than whether a couple of expat students get laid (Horacio Castellanos Moya's "Snatch"). Or take Andrés Felipe Solano's "Six Months on Minimum Wage," a politically charged reflection on a migrant Colombian worker's life, which comes on the heels of Teresa Solana's "A Stitch in Time," which relocates Hitchcock's "Lamb to the Slaughter" to Spain and throws in crotchety old ladies as killers, for good measure.

Less sampling than outright smorgasbord, the anthology runs the gamut, from slice-of-life scenarios to folk tales to sheer surrealism. While things get downright haphazard at times – three stories from China and Japan are crammed in at the very end, as if someone realized late in the day that East Asia should be represented – and the constant shifts in locales, tones and styles might give some readers whiplash, there is a method to this madness. "Better to get someone on the telephone – even if there's some static on the – than not to," write the editors, and why not open as many lines as possible?

The entries in the anthology that linger are the ones that sweep us up in the rewards of grounded storytelling. Ismat Chughtai's "Of Fists and Rubs" is all fractured flashbacks and colorful slang, evolving from a bawdy anecdote about two Indian temp nurses whoring themselves out on the side into a conclusion that shocks with its casual cruelty. "The Pomegranate Lady and Her Sons" by Goli Taraghi, which chronicles an airport run-in between two Iraqi women (one young and apprehensive about leaving the country, the other old and desperate to see her son in Sweden) builds its rhythms upon small talk and the divulging of personal histories, to the point that whether an old lady makes a connecting flight carries as much suspense as any action thriller. And then there's "Is This How Women Grow Up?" by Leila Marouane, which drapes its

now-familiar theme of an oppressed Middle Eastern woman in start-and-stop narration, then goes meta-fictional at a key moment.

Other stories are less about their country of origin and more about their individual authors' flights of fancy. Marek Huberath's baleful "Yoo Retoont, Sneogg. Ay No" plays like the bastard child of Kafka and Karel Čapek, positing a future where humans are created from others' body parts and pay for the privilege of pain-free existence. Lúcia Bettencourt's "Borges's Secretary" is a classically Borgesian text of games and erudition wherein a nameless secretary usurps the famous man's role in the writing process like a benevolent virus. Still other works cast a knowing glance at the weird, wonderful hegemony of the West and comment on it in quirky ways: Najem Wali's "Waltzing Matilda" subverts *Casablanca* by relocating it to Basra (in this case, we'll always have Piraeus), while a missionary's lesson to Nigerian kids in Akinwumi Isola's "The Grammar of Easter (You Don't Say That in English)" becomes a linguistic nightmare ("We crucified with him!" "We buried with him!").

Speaking of linguistic nightmares, the anthology goes relatively light on the poetry. The included essay "Correspondences in the Air: On the Ecco Anthology of International Poetry" makes a stirring case for dialogue within and without the Anglo-American tradition, but as one reads the poems contained herein, one inevitably senses the *frission* between the translations, as workmanlike as they may be, and the full impact of the originals in their native tongue. One exception is Nomura Kiwao's precise, delicate "Riverwilt," which snakes out in alternating prose and poetry, one commenting on the other as the poet converses with himself about his past.

At its best, *Words Without Borders: The Best of the First Ten Years* offers the thrill of engagement, encouraging readers to get active with the text, to reflect every unfamiliar cultural more or unique bit of vocabulary that pops up, to inquire and ponder. This might sound like a masturbatory exercise for scholars, but the sheer breadth on display here is too entertaining for that. And finally, there's Lawrence Venuti's essay "How to Read a Translation," which can be taken as a Rosetta Stone for approaching the anthology as a whole. Venuti suggests that treating translation as a valid work of creation in its own right

allows the translator the opportunity to "compensate for an irreparable loss by controlling an exorbitant gain," and if the gains of this smorgasbord are anything to go on, the compensations are worth the effort.

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