

Translation from *Requiem* by Alpheratz (2015) – excerpt from the opening chapter of the novel. Third Place winner in the John Dryden Translation Competition 2021.

~~He is dar~~ It is dark in the gymnasium.

I wait. The others have already been met by their Mothers and the Words *Emergency Exit* are glowing in the half-light. The vaulting horse has its four legs crudely splayed apart, as though about to urinate. The uneven bars, whose chalk-coated girth eludes our small hands, wait for me to turn my back so their mockery can begin. The balance beam streaks the horizon with a rough, ominous line, which I know to be as precarious as a thread suspended over the abyss. Only the floor, that large carpeted square from which we propel ourselves skyward, offers a glimpse of uncurbed freedom.

I am met by Silence.

The gym, previously a human aviary aflutter with echoes and flying bodies, has fallen quiet. No longer is she pulsing with Mr Mirak's curt, bellowed instructions, as he primes us to leap into the nothingness. Every last cry is now stifled within me. As my body reels from the torrent of instructions and dizzying movements, my colliding senses can still be heard reverberating somewhere far in the distance.

During training, I don't have Time to master the apparatus. THEy remain stubbornly aloof. That's why I have to master tHEm. With my hands, I cajole tHEm. Deep in my heart, I speak to tHEm, imploring tHEm. But those stubborn he-creatures don't want to know. I'm ill-versed in tHEir language, barely able to attract tHEir attention or grasp tHEir structure. Occasionally, we strike a deal. But as I prepare to launch off, I never know if tHEy have really understood, or whether tHEy are just tricking me. THEy are liars and cheats.

Silence spreads through me.

Every training session begins with the same activity: letting ourselves drop from the highest bar into the arms of Mr Mirak. Sometimes the path of our fall takes him by surprise, but he always manages to catch us. His agile body and endless arms never leave us. My Laughter erupts so violently that it penetrates our Instructor. Eyes glimmering, the tension eases from his pursed lips. To take him unawares, I try falling in every possible way: slowly, quickly, backwards, eyes closed...and my Laughter surges, unfailingly, towards the criss-cross mullions of the skylight above.

Nobody is left now, except the apparatus.

Who is speaking?

Why this fleeting and foreboding sentence, pronounced in metallic tones which ring out like a bell, sending tremors coursing through me?

It's nothing, just a brazen figment of my imagination. Just another of these fantasies which swamp me with lightning flashes, comets, fireworks, glowering ambitions, swarming hordes and cocktails of truths and lies, making me see the threats lurking in adult conversations, making me decipher the menaces their faces cannot conceal, and unleashing on me all the promises, infernos and labours of this baffling world.

In the end, Silence overcomes me.

And although I am just a child, a splintered mosaic assailed by harsh images beyond my girlish comprehension, a blind Conscience slavishly devoted to my Parents and Teachers, in this moment I am able to recognise the space offered to me by Time, an eternal place removed from this world and its obligations.

I mount the balance beam, even though she's my least favourite apparatus. With one foot in front of the other, both arms outstretched, I want to attempt a backwards walkover.

Even when Mr Mirak is at my side, standing on a pile of mats and ready to catch me if I fall, I dare not risk it. So why now, when I'm here all alone?

This is a private matter between me and myself. It's none of my Instructor's business. With my thumbs pressed together, poised to grasp the beam, I close my mind to everything except the trajectory of the backwards walkover.

In my mind's eye, I tirelessly retrace the path my body must follow through the air.

At what point will Fear place herself in my way?

My inversion was too crude, sending both my legs flailing over to one side and brusquely displacing me from the beam. Once on the floor, it takes me only moments to recover. But what keeps me down there is surprise.

I didn't hurt myself.

Immediately, I reposition myself on the beam. My organs are panic stricken, my Thoughts are confused, every member of my body is quivering. There are so many elements to control!

Shh...calm yourself.

I take flight.

And I manage it!

Instantly, Fear hurls me to the ground.

A storm brews inside me as I attempt to focus only on the magical line of the backwards walkover, on the unforgettable feeling of the body tracing this pure line.

Here I go again!

But Fear is on the move, impossible to pin down. How can she be so devious?

She emerges when I least expect it, once my acrobatics are underway and, with my head upside down and lungs constricted, I become conscious of the feat I'm attempting.

My chest contorts into a spiral and this time, as the beam grates the flesh from my ribs, she even wrests a cry from me.

That's when I open the floodgates to Fury.

I jump to my feet and let out a long, bestial moan.

I get back in position.

This time!

Dream on.

However, after being thrown to the ground on my umpteenth failed attempt, I am suddenly seized by a great feeling of calm.

I've fallen in every possible way.

Slowly, I remount the beam.

But this time, I press myself against her, squaring up to her. I embrace her, caressing my face against her, clamping my thighs around her and drawing her into me. And I too become linear, rigid and coarse, drinking in all that is happening to me. My body is slotting into place, my Conscience absorbing every atom of the universe. I no longer need to think, nor control my movements. They are no longer my own, but rather belong to one older and wiser than me. How supple she is, what a natural! At last, she and I are united.

Painstakingly, I regulate my breathing, my positioning, my timing.

There's no time left to hesitate.

And I pull off the backwards walkover.

From nowhere, Ms Mirak appears, smiling at me. Her expression is a hypnotic triptych of surprise, amusement and calm. She brushes past me without a backward glance.

I am grateful to both of us. To her, for not shattering this moment with words. To myself, for not doing the same in an effort to please her.

She vanishes.

I make no attempt to understand it. This feat is too momentous, there are too many demons skulking around. So I jump down from the beam, without pushing my luck further.

I dive into the training pit, a swimming pool-sized container filled with foam cubes which cushion the landings from our glides. With the tip of my fingernail, I etch my signature into the leather cover of the vaulting horse: *Yum!*

But something has been unsettled by my success. Fearsome creatures with haggard faces, unbearable to behold, are closing ranks. Behind those long curtains, which stretch from the ceiling right down to the coloured basketball and handball markings on the gymnasium floor, an intolerable apparition awaits. A spectre who will devour me inside his cavernous black mouth, engulfing me in his vileness. Sensing that I'm about to cry out, I seek refuge on the floor.

I slip off my pumps and the cool, rugged touch of the dense, almost granular, carpet fibres envelops the soles of my feet. For a few moments, as this pleasurable sensation continues her progress to my toes, I can think of nothing else. Ahead of me, the diagonal of the floor extends out in an infinite line.

I salute in the way Mr Mirak taught us: with the body reaching skywards like a column supporting the heavens.

And I take flight.

I'm back on the ground in the blink of an eye. However, by resolving not to land immediately, I can keep myself aloft a second longer and...*FREEEEZE!!!* Smile for the camera! With a deft somersault, I reach my maximum speed within a few moves. My arms

sweep up of their own accord and I thrust myself into the air, quick as an artillery shell. *BOOM!* I land triumphantly, arching my back and spreading my wings. *Déboulés*, arm waves, a soaring arabesque twist...*Go on, take all the Time and space you need...* Who is speaking? Gurning like a Chinese demon, I freeze abruptly, still with my chest bowed and arms outstretched. As slowly as I possibly can, I draw them back in towards me.

Immediately, I am invaded by a series of infinitesimal sensations. The air particles displaced by my arm movements are still floating around me, the tiny atoms weaving their way between my fingertips.

I contemplate my hands in astonishment, as though seeing them for the first time.

And this opens a vortex which sucks me up like a vacuum cleaner.

I touch down on competition day.

Frozen before the boundary line of the floor area, I wait.

I have ascended the few steps leading to the judges' table. The electricity of those few strides has told me what is about to happen, before anyone else knows.

I've been kept waiting for too long whilst Mr Mirak complains to the judges. My arms are plastered to my sides and I can feel lightning streaming through me. As my body surges with current, I become invincible, immune to the scornful stares of the female spectators closest to me, the looks of disappointment set on the judges' faces, and even the fixed smiles of my classmates, who sit blinded by their own girlish Fear. I have already become deaf to Mr Mirak's indignant sermon.

Then suddenly, She appears.

I am perforated by a tender, devastating explosion, and allow myself to sink into Her liberating obliteration. She stifles all earthly noise, right down to the chants of support, the

incessant hubbub and the roars of the crowd, whilst I fling myself from the cliff and telluric forces shake the heavens. Every sound is ensnared by Her melodic sling, which gathers them up in its score and catapults them through the glass roof, in an endless crescendo towards the heavens.

I am the airborne autumn leaves, unsure which direction to take.

I am the flight of spring pollen, climbing slowly skywards.

I am the gentle touch of raindrops on the ocean.

But I am also explosive Fury, the violent blows delivered without warning by the person you love most in this world.

I am incredible things, a nonsensical outburst, a chemical element, a snowflake, an alien. And I have the ability to move with ineffable nimbleness, with the ease and grace that only a child with supreme Confidence in her surroundings can possess.

All obstacles have evaporated. Here in the incalculable dimensions of this suddenly penetrable, star-spangled space, I find myself transformed into a free-moving element, a creature that is no longer truly human.

But She is already growing weaker, her music fading away.

She returns to whence She came, rejoining the billions of fragments, molecules, flakes, jewels and petals from which we all proceed. She is swallowed up by the hands of the judges, the lithe muscles of the gymnasts, the open mouths of the Parents. After a time, she simply vanishes.

And that is when my score flashes up on the screens.

Success matters so much to grown-ups.

I'm reading in the daylight, that brilliant light which rains straight down from the sky.

The floorboards creak under an unidentified weight. Here in this pillowy, sun-drenched cocoon where I wake up to the world, each noise resounds as distinctly as a strummed note to the trained ear of an instrument maker. But the Silence resumes undeterred, made only richer by every unexpected, intermittent sound. My Mother is bustling about in the kitchen, somewhere in the depths of the flat. I am comforted by her gentle rumblings, which reassure me that this most loving of beings is still there. And in these quiet moments, it is through books that I discover the world, against the backdrop of the vast sky and my Mother's distant silhouette.

My Father is absent. He is away on one of his important trips. Or perhaps he is there, but isn't making a sound.

Settled on the floorboards, my child's body marring their neat lines like an oversized, amorphous and slightly sticky marshmallow, I leaf through the pages of a book.

The myths of ancient Greece and Rome recount how the gods and goddesses frolic with human beings.

The fairytales of Europe speak of damsels in distress, who always end up finding their prince. The book has a pale cover, with a golden ballerina inlaid in the centre. I spend hours touching her, stroking her with my fingertips.

The folktales from Asia harbour marvellous phenomena, telling of plump insects with moustaches you can count, and flower petals that lead to other worlds.

The stories of Indian lovers, always estranged and at last reunited, are inhabited by figures with huge, stretched eyes, who carry everything with the very tips of their long-fingered hands.

The books of Norse mythology have me captivated. Whether I flick through them at speed, thrust them open at random, or painstakingly prise them apart, I always stumble upon the same image: a bearded man with bulging eyes, who stands at the prow of a ship brandishing a severed head.

Despite the horror he inspires in me, I am transfixed by the expression on his face.

What pleasure can he derive from the act of killing?

Whenever I'm ill, I retreat into Japanese tales, joining the empress as she plays the koto in the genteel, melancholy calm of the summer palace. As I sit beside her facing the rocky furrows of the zen garden, I watch avidly as the trees perform a swaying dance with their arms, tracing the words kimono, koto and Amateratsu across the sky. Then suddenly a nightingale perches on a branch, which bows under his weight.

Once I have closed the book of Japanese tales, the naïve diamond shapes on the cover remind me of the delicate, fishnet-patterned windows of ancient castles. And these eloquent forms in turn spider across my hands and face, entwining themselves in a latticed screen from behind which I merely spectate upon the world. As I shall one day understand, it is this invisible, ethereal barrier which is to mould my view of the world. Unlike in other stories, where I can land unannounced amongst the characters and disrupt their relationships and fortunes, in these Japanese tales I have no desire to disturb. The shapes and scents of their gardens are too masterful, their talismanic Words too sacred, and their power too ephemeral and fragile, sensitive to any external force.

The fantastic symphony of these stories laps around my teddies and dolls, combs its fingers through my hair, deposits fragments of images, memories and dreams behind my

files and pens, and leaves my Mind swimming with echoes of their battles and songs. And along with these storybook memories, I rediscover the fumigating movement that implanted them there, the imperceptible march of this purifying army. And soon a neck appears, followed by a chest, then a face, until finally a complete figure flows from my ink cartridge, only to be instantly erased in my tireless whirlwind of childish energy.

Everyday life has been reduced to a formality, a transition place where I simply wait to pass from one book to the next. She is quite pointless. But I endure her like everyone else, not really knowing why. I only know that I must obey.

But books are different. I can hold them out flat in my hand, gauging their weight. I can open them at random, cracking their spine and inhaling the scent that wafts up from the little opening. And I can listen to their stories, tales without end which carry me ever further away from everyone else, redefining all that is ordinary as singular, unmistakable madness.

I feel an insatiable Hunger. My Mother sacrifices her quarter of melon to me, a splendid wedge of crisp, juice-filled flesh, which provokes disapproving comments from my Father and Sister. The fruit is succulent and juicy, its coral hue so bright that it seems fluorescent. As I bite into it, my teeth send juice gushing forth and I quickly Hoover up the liquid that disperses across my palate. I contemplate the skin as I place it down on my plate. Tiny, rainbow-coloured spots pepper its numerous cavities, but my eyes are too weak to see inside.

“Do you know how much I weighed when I left the camp?”

My Father is eating, hunched over his bowl with his neck outstretched and eyes darting back and forth.

We've heard this story a thousand times but never tire of it, knowing how much it means to him.

“Four and a half stone! So...*pfft!*”

Unbidden, my Mother serves him another helping. And I too eat until I am fit to burst, to the point of nausea, because my Father is the best, because he's lived through unbelievable things in the war, things no other Father has experienced. I too finish every morsel without ever satisfying my hunger. And all the while his stories crumble and drift around his face, this face whose every last wrinkle fills me with reverence.

My Mother always saves the last few chips for me, defying the greedy eyes of my Father and Sister. Our supreme love is predicated on the idea of my being, as my Mother never tires of telling me, her 'gallant protector'. This irritates the pair of them, who condemn us with critical glares. But I am resolute in embodying the chivalric virtues of justice and strength in combat, convinced that I was born to serve my Mother and defend her.

But against what?

The periods between mealtimes are marked by Silence and emptiness, by the echo of footsteps in a flat seemingly devoid of life. I spend long, wordless hours with my Mother, during which every creak of the floorboards assumes the intensity of an explosion. The increasingly violent knocking of strangers at the door makes us jump, and my mother immediately presses her finger to her lips. Her outstretched palm bids me to stay silent, but whenever the strangers mention God, she opens the door to them.

Their whispered conversations plunge me into a state of incomprehension, which is only deepened by the mysterious sadness that taints her every word and gesture. It's a

sadness that makes her weep inexplicably, whether she's kneading dough in the kitchen, or listening to an opera. In these moments, I cease to be her gallant protector. I become not simply invisible, but intolerable to her, branded by the troublingly unmoved and unsmiling expression that intermittently sweeps her face.

Sometimes she'll strip stale bandages from the mummies that hide in her darkened bedroom, carefully uncoiling the locks of dark brown hair she still insists on calling 'blonde'. Or else she'll get upset at the sight of a vile pink cameo brooch, which looks as though it was hewn from the skin of the woman who once wore it. And her words emerge cautiously, forming only disjointed, incomplete snatches of stories which bob about in the watchful torpor which floods the flat.

Why are we both sworn to Silence?

Is it because of the grocer's shop her Father ran during the war?

"Shh!"

Her finger leaps to her lips.

"We don't speak about that!"

Outside, storm clouds besiege the sky. And despite my clownish tumbles and exaggerated displays of clumsiness, despite all the tricks of my cheery travelling circus, she remains beyond our reach. And suddenly her Fury rains down in tears, insults and screams. My Sister cannot forgive these outbursts, but I remain devoted to my Mother like a little ape, having seen the dark clouds in her eyes from which her venomous showers pour forth, and glimpsed the distant horizons from which her joys and sorrows hail. And I accept her acid rain as stoically as her kisses, as part of the natural order, despite the fact that nothing on earth is spared by this storm, not even the people and things she once claimed to love and find beautiful. Her deluge of resentment and bile, which the others deem

indefensible, cascades over my face, shoulder and arms, seeking to erase me with vitriolic tears. Then, after the downpour, the soprano's voice resurges from the pores of our sodden cheeks and drifts over a jungle of things unsaid.

But from afar, we are suddenly pierced by the stark, powerful cry of an eagle.

And like an irrepressible, disembodied arrow, like a wild bird plunging from the clifftop, my Sister swoops down on us with refreshing energy, tearing through every mangrove of rotting secrets and jerking us back to life.

As we stand spattered by the traces of her dives, flights and parades, we marvel at her imperious veneer of certainty, dazzled by her ability to gaze far beyond the horizon. For my Sister is endowed with both the eyesight and attributes of her totem, enabling her to see things we cannot see, go places we cannot tread. The sea spray that she sends flying into the atmosphere lashes against the premature streaks of decay on our faces, and her cry is simultaneously that of a heavenly creature and a predator. A winged enigma without a care, who ruthlessly pounces on those who are most vulnerable.

“The masculine shall prevail over the feminine. Words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females.”

The boys titter. The girls make no sound.

I look towards Sir to point out his mistake, to interrupt the course of our French grammar lesson which has resumed without a flicker of Laughter from anyone.

But no.

He is deadly serious.

How is this possible?

When tHEy twist your arm behind your back so you can't move, prompting you to cry out for tHEm to stop, the boys never let you go straight away. Instead, tHEy twist all the harder, brutally strengthening tHEir grip one last time in order to teach you a good lesson, in order to leave tHEir mark. That way, you won't forget it is tHEy who are the strongest, it is tHEy who rule.

So we girls just stand in a circle in the playground, watching tHEm do tHEir thing. We cheer tHEm on to put the ball in the net. We clap, scream and whoop whenever one of tHEm scores. We laud tHEm, sing tHEir names and fetch tHEir ball when she strays beyond the makeshift lines of rucksacks marking the field of play. We solicit tHEir attention with fictions, with implausible and nonsensical tales of women with magical powers. But it's no use. All tHEy want is for you to shut up and do as tHEy say.

Sometimes, one of us seeks to join in tHEir games. tHEy admit her into tHEir ranks reluctantly, only after the last boy has been picked, if tHEy really have no other choice.

To get our own back, we try outshouting tHEm, taunting tHEm and hounding tHEm with words. That throws tHEm a bit off balance, tHEy don't understand these sudden unprovoked attacks, these irrational explosions of Fury. tHEy stare at us like we're madwomen. Everything was going just fine, and then we came along and spoilt everything.

In class the boys never come top — tHEy're too restless and get bored too quickly, taking only a superficial interest in things. I observe how the windows court tHEir miserable gaze, arousing tHEir desire to be outside moving, bounding and chasing after tHEir beloved ball. But however hard we try, whatever our aSHEvements, *the masculine shall prevail over the feminine*. Who would dare contradict Sir?

I think he's great. My hand shoots up before he's even finished the question because I'm his best student, the 'teacher's darling', as the others put it. It's a Pleasure to make him happy by supplying the answers he's waiting for, before anyone else can get a word in. In the playground, I'm just a sub-boy. But in class, I can sense the benevolent power of an Order which strives for equality, together with the supreme goodness of he who imparts it to us.

The masculine shall prevail over the feminine? You can't do anything about it. It's in all the books, inscribed in French grammar. Even for me, the 'teacher's darling', this grammar is unintelligible. She is hateful.

One day, I conduct an experiment.

Sir stands assuredly on his plinth, writing on the blackboard. Still facing the blackboard, he asks his question. And I do not answer.

Nobody answers.

I watch his shoulders tense, his back stiffen. When he turns around, we all bury our heads in our exercise books, girls and boys alike.

The seconds tick by and pound frantically against my skull with their iron beaks, but I don't give in.

Then Silence returns.

I steal a glance up at the cliff, where Sir stands scrutinising us. And I suddenly quake.

Is that him swaying perilously over the abyss?

Then the unthinkable happens.

Is that really him, stumbling and falling?

I watch as the clouds carry away a dark silhouette, scarcely able to believe it's him. But despite the distance between us, I recognise his severe gaze, which adeptly suffuses me

with fear and guilt even though I've done nothing wrong. I contemplate the grotesque contortions of his airborne body. He has become a mere puppet, a murky, flaccid spectre which is now being deformed and scattered by the wind. It is as though, suddenly devoid of my zeal, Sir has lost all substance.

I gawp as his body plummets and smashes against our tables, sending thick, sticky liquid spurting in all directions until only an inky puddle remains.

Finally, to regain his original form, Sir elects to answer his own question.

I can sense the profound discomfort of this man — Sir, no less! — for which I am responsible. Me, of all people!

I press a hand to my searing cheek. Fire is tearing through my insides, but I hold firm!

I keep my head bowed, the same as everyone else. But I can still feel his gaze soaring over me, grazing me with its great, dark wing. I am so disconcerted by the sudden distance between us that I nearly put my hand up to confess, to explain everything. But something stops me at the eleventh hour. *The masculine shall prevail over the feminine.*

I never raised my hand again.

Why?

Fear.

And Resignation.

The mighty Resignation of the majority.