





**BETWEEN INFLUENCE AND  
INSPIRATION:  
POETRY AS TRANSLATIONAL ACT**

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## BETWEEN INFLUENCE AND INSPIRATION

Do not be frightened by the name of this chapbook. In these pages, you will get a rigorous workout, not just of writing but also through concerted consideration of influence and affect. So many poets in my early years of writing poetry would say things casually to me like *I don't really read much when I'm writing. I don't want to be influenced by others.* You can imagine the poets who would say this kind of thing—usually white men with man buns who refuse to shower and acknowledge that there is life outside of the United States, except for Europe, oh, and except for the small town in Latin America where they spent time *helping the locals.*

It's a gray area, the space between influence and inspiration—not American imperialism. As someone from the margins—queer, immigrant, non-Christian—I have only ever been in that area. Now, I've dared to embrace it. I let indeterminacy empower me on a psycho-spiritual level as I write and translate.

I really love the idea that the body is the antenna for the universe, that through the senses we are able to map out our *Umwelten* as humans. Taking this to mean that anything that we try to represent will not be the thing, but our experiences of the thing and that language itself is removed from meaning, combined with the fact of utterance's abstraction from the thing. Our jobs become mystical in that we are to transpose and orchestrate mystifications to produce in the reader a sense of awe, and if we are lucky, astonishment. If we are luckier, the astonishment will be our own. Astonishment allows for the queer experience of the world—and I say queer to represent orientations and strategies to render visible the affective. If poetry is not the vehicle for this, then there is no vehicle—moreover, there is no road or even concept of travel.

In these following chapters, you will notice that there is a recurring prompt that centers my articulation of deviant translation, which is a way of pushing yourself from influence and imitation to new poems. I love this prompt and use it often. Interspersed here are prompts that ask you to consider image, the unexpected image, migration of non-American/English language forms into

English, and finding forms in nature. It's structured almost as an entire class— with the deviant translation prompt infinitely repeatable. Please be inspired. Please imitate. Please practice these translational acts. If nothing else, just see where they lead you. It's all an experiment. There are no real rules here, just doors that I'm opening.

## TRANSLATING THE IMAGE

That poetry is an act of translation is not a controversial thing to believe. Our bodies are antennae for the universe; our senses are the tines, our writing represents a map of our sensations, the poem a trace of our understanding. Self in place. Self in time. Whether the "I" is the collective representation, or the assumption of a speaker lodged outside of the identity of the poet, or the poet speaking themselves, remains a question that is unsolvable and irrelevant. What is relevant is making the reader aware of the web of connections between senses and ideas through rigorous use of language and specificity. This chapbook is arranged to give you space to generate work that you can go back to and edit. The idea here is to write as much as you can so that you will have unedited material that you can go back to and revise.

Attention and recklessness are certainly part of this process of translation. In the first section of *The Art of Attention*, Donald Revell makes many pronouncements about the nature of poetry, its connection with the imagination, and with faith. Perhaps most striking is his reading of the classic poets like William Carlos Williams's "So Much Depends", and he shows what he means when he quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson:

"There is then creative reading as well as creative writing," and the best poems are irresistible invitations to just such reading because the attention they have paid literally begets a present attention. The creative act is continuous, before, during, and after the poem (6).

Indeed, the notion of a sustained attention channels its velocity into what Revell calls the "eyebam." He says:

The poem's trajectory is an eyebam, not an outline. It is a visual sequence (7).

While this certainly privileges vision, and while many people are disabled in the world, what I extrapolate from this is that the image (whether visual or auditory, etc.) is the support structure of the poem—it can lead the reader from one thought to another thought without overreliance on explanation. I



like this mode of poetry as translation because it gives the reader back their agency—they are intended to become “creative readers,” which is why I often times feel so inspired by reading books of poetry. Inevitably, what we write shows our readers how we think of the world and the connections our brains make.

In *The Art of Description*, Mark Doty says, “The need to translate experience into something resembling adequate language is the writer’s blessing or the writer’s disease, depending on your point of view” (Doty 10). This self-ness is imperative to the poet—to be able to represent their world in their own terms, coming from their own perspectives.

He goes on to say, “Poetry concretizes the singular, unrepeatable moment; it hammers out of speech a form for how it feels to be oneself” (21). In this way, the poem that the poet writes illustrates and fleshes-out their own perceptions of the world.

This can be achieved through translating the sensory experience of being a human into image and writing.

Think of the poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” by William Carlos Williams:

so much depends  
upon  
  
a red wheel  
barrow  
  
glazed with rain  
water  
  
beside the white  
chickens

What's remarkable about this poem is that the deliberate treatment of image deepens while the stanza progresses. We start out with what feels like the stakes of the poem with “so much [depending]” upon something else. At the end of the four couplets, we have a wheelbarrow nestled in its context—

something that makes me as a reader think of the work associated with the pastoral scene.

The work of the image is not to represent anything, rather it is to represent itself. Within this famous poem is a poem; imagination, the cure for “crude symbolism.”

## IMAGE PROMPT

For this exercise, take thirty minutes to go outside and observe. The exercise is to connect you with the act of reading the object/landscape/person with the act of writing that very thing/person. Are you moving the reader's attention? How are you moving from one image to another? What is the attention that you are paying to the world around you? Are you lingering to produce a visual sequence that reveals an intimacy?

In a four stanza poem with no more than five words per line, write an image that you "saw" on your walk. Write it in clear, simple language. Pick an image like a rose, a flock of birds, or anything else. There doesn't need to be an over-explanation of the image, rather a slight nuance in one word that points to "story." In your draft try to use as many of the following constraints. Don't worry if they make it into the final draft—it's perfectly fine to abandon the constraints that do not serve the poem. Write a poem that:

1. Sustains attention in at least twenty lines of no more than fifteen words per line.
2. Begins with an image and ends with an image
3. Links creative reading of the object to creative writing.
4. Observes and implicates the reader in whatever it is that is seen.
5. Works on the level of image to reveal an emotional truth.

## CAN DEVIANT TRANSLATION LEAD TO ORIGINAL POETRY?

One thing I do not want to do is to bandy about the word *translation* without recognizing it as a rigorous art form or “mode of writing” with the potential to expand the worldview of the reader. Sometimes translation of actual poetry into English gives me inspiration and insight into my own obsessions and proclivities as a poet. From the first few pages here, one might think that I am advocating for the continued supremacy of lyric poetry without the use of exploration of other modes of writing. Many of my students suggest to me after these previous exercises that they fear that their own poetry may be influenced by another’s writing—especially after reading people like Williams and Bishop, as though these poets’ received modes are the only modes in which their writing will be taken seriously.

But what is originality in a world where we are made up from the same periodic elements? Our practice of poetics and writing veer towards an aesthetics that are culturally defined as Dean Young expounds in *The Art of Recklessness*. He says, “ERROR IS GENIOUS: no real originality: copy masters and your failures will lead to beauty” (Young 48).

But there is something that does not sit right in my spirit when thinking of translating folk songs from Bhojpuri and Caribbean Hindustani into English. These performed poetries have influenced me greatly, and I am influenced by them in more ways than I realize—the subconscious mind uses these songs as a template for sound and image. And there is no living in just an English world for me without my Guyanese Creole, Hindi, and Bhojpuri worlds erupting. Whether there’s a scorpion sting in my poem or a jamun fruit, these are particular things with nuances. The scorpion sting has sexual nuance as does the jamun fruit. The jamun is also bitter and sour, its juice stains clothes and they are not easy to come by in Colorado. See how many words it took me to explain this? How can a simple one-to-one word substitution possibly encompass the magic, the web of associations?

To me these are important, and the entire question needs to be queered. I ask, where is the original and where is the translation? The idea of the deviant

translation, for me, is formed out of the questions posed by scholars such as Nir Kedem in his article “What is Queer Translation?” after locating the queerness in translation: is it a method or a product? He asks, “Does it imply that one is firstly a translator who then translates queerly, or that one is already queer when one begins to translate? Most importantly, *what difference does it make and for whom?*” (161).

The object of the deviant translation as it incarnates is to resist the binary of arrival and non-arrival. It calls into being an acknowledgement of history and poetry as my community practices it. There is no such thing as purity. The untouched exists as a pole for the asymptote of language: an approximation to the content and form of the representation.

To borrow from José Muñoz: The deviant’s identity is always on the horizon. To deviate is to diverge from. The deviant is a diverging pervert. The deviant is obsessed with the transgressive. Translation in leather with chains and nipple clips. The deviant translation shifts the gaze from the original text to the creation of the new text. The focus is then on process and slippage, where the translations are diasporas of the migrant translator who is both deviant and devious. The translation through transposition becomes the *authentic* in that it is the only vehicle for the migrant-as-deviant affective reservoir.

Mostly, the idea of migration of meaning is a challenging one to me. Typically, slippage and individuated phenomenological realization—semantic and affective—are not easily described or quantified in the discursive space of public culture. Public cultural productions trade in shortcuts and clichés hoping to resonate with the participators, and in my experience as a reader and a poet, the resonance is at best partial. It may be a matter of genre/gender.

## DEVIANT TRANSLATION PROMPT

The idea of the deviant translation is to begin with an original text that has little literary merit. It could be a song (this is a transgression to say given I come from oral traditions) or a piece of art. It could be in another language or in English.

### Part I

- I. Take the original piece of art and think about your own mind, spirit, body and write down a translation of the original as you want it to be written, deviating from the ideas and images already presented.
  - a. For example, imagine the lyrics of the song are “कोई नैना से नैना मिलाये चला जाय कोई नैना” ([View Song Here](#))
  - b. If you do not speak or understand Sarnami, Bhojpuri, or Hindi, enter it into Google Translate to generate the first “translation” that you work from for this prompt.
  - c. OR if you are working with something in English and the words are “Blackbird singing in the dead of night” translate this into your own present idiom
  - d. Ex: “Raven calls out from a dead branch/no where in sight, any light/other than all light”
2. Translate the entire piece!

## WRITING AN UNEXPECTED IMAGE

Poet Robert Haas writes,

Images haunt. There is a whole mythology built on this fact: Cézanne painting till his eyes bled, Wordsworth wandering the Lake Country hills in an impassioned daze. Blake describes it very well, and so did the colleague of Tu Fu who said to him, “It is like being alive twice.” Images are not quite ideas, they are stiller than that, with less implication outside themselves. And they are not myth, they do not have the explanatory power; they are nearer to pure story. Nor are they always metaphors; they do not this is that, they say this is.

As Haas describes, the image is a device that gives the reader two lives—where ideas and notions do not require the over explanation, they are the things language says they are. We can have the poststructuralist debate, whether there is any relationship between an actual gerber daisy and the words written on this page—the abstraction of language and the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign performing their imaginative magic in our minds. But let’s not.

Images can do just this; with their specificity, they can conjure in the reader’s mind the spell that you intend. They can be used to manipulate the reader into emotional resonance that suits the arc of your poem. I love the use of the unexpected image—they grab me and thrust my mind into associative vaulting. And the essence of the image is the poet’s translation of the sensory world into poetry. Be specific. It’s not a flower, it’s a saffron gerber daisy that’s been half plucked and wilting, brown creeping to the center from the remaining petals.

The human senses are: sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell, and if you’re also an Aquarius like me, then Knowing (the psychic sense). Visual images are the most common in literature say Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux in *A Poet’s Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry*. But there are also senses innate to the human experience that these don’t cover. These other senses are: Pressure, itch, thermoception, prioception, tension sensors, nociception, equilibrioception, stretch receptors, chemoreceptors, thirst,

hunger, magnetoception, and time. For the definitions, [check out this article in Sensory Trust](#).



## UNEXPECTED IMAGE PROMPT

Write a poem using a sense that you have never used or just learned about.

1. Without simile, “translate” or “carry over” the image into words. Let the poem be just the encounter with whatever image or object you are considering.
2. Find a painting that intrigues you—you do not have to particularly love the artwork, something that just provokes you or compels you. Write an ekphrastic poem about this art that uses primarily olfactory and images that relate to magnetoreception and time.

## DEVIANT TRANSLATION PROMPT PT. 2

- I. Take your translation from Part I and retranslate into another voice, using another eye toward translation and transformation.
  - a. As an example:
    - i. Translate your translation into the voice of a sparrow
    - ii. Translate your translation into a new iteration that describes the context of the poem shifting in your hands
    - iii. Translate your translation into a different language using Google Translate and then bring it back into English. What has shifted?
    - iv. Enter your translation into [n+7](#)
  - b. Maybe you choose to work in languages that you already know—standard and nonstandard languages
    - i. Creoles
    - ii. NYC accented speech
    - iii. Interlanguage
    - iv. Language that isn't sound
2. Think about your approach here: are you hungry? Is your translation thirsty? Is your translation one where you don't use any "o"s? Push yourself into the limitlessness of possibilities. Trust your instincts and spirit.

## IMMIGRANT FORM

Many of you will be surprised by my saying this: there is a poetic world outside of the West. Well, of course, that might make sense, but maybe not enough for you to imagine migrating a doha, chaupai, or a qawwali into English. When considering formal constrictions and the paths into liberation they offer, I think it's important to consider the migration of non-European forms into English language and the potential that they open up for what I'm calling "magic." I define magic as movement of the reader—the reader being moved emotionally and psychically by the poem, in an affective turn. As Kimiko Hahn says, "If it's not to be moved or to move others, why write a poem?" I think of this often and would add, is there a way for a form to harness the potential of history and a sense of poetics, for form to speak as content?

I have come to my own personal challenge in which I consider the weight of form as it informs the structures of spontaneity, accuracy, and mystery—which all seem to fit together in what comes from migrating forms from other languages into English. This is an act of translation, transposition, and creation.

As someone who has been interested in a kind of poetry that has crossed seas and borders, I have taken a lot of inspiration from poets who have migrated forms from other languages and countries to crash upon the American poetry scene. Two of these forms are from Agha Shahid Ali and Kimiko Hahn: the ghazal and the zuihitsu respectively.

### **The Ghazal**

To begin this idea of "immigrant form" or the migration of a form into English, let's consider the poem ["Tonight" by Agha Shahid Ali](#) as it illuminates several moments of intertextuality, decolonization, and forging a poetic intervention that makes American poetry available to South Asian American poets, allowing for cultural syncretism.

The ghazal, also known as the Persian sonnet, is a form that Ali worked hard to bring into the American literary landscape. The ghazal form is written in couplets that has no organizing principle outside of the formal constraints that govern line and repetition. The couplets coalesce around a paratactic logic, a principle of grammar and repetition that surprises with its each iteration. Both lines of the first couplet end with the same word and the second line of the following couplets end with that same word from the first pair. The first line of the last couplet must make reference to the poet's name. This structure is based on a form that has its origins in North Africa traveling across to the Arabian Peninsula and then through Iran and Afghanistan into what is now Pakistan and India. The form is musical in structure and is often times sung. In fact, it is through translating Faiz Ahmed Faiz that Agha Shahid Ali came to the ghazal form himself. He thought English to be a clumsy vessel for this poem until he came to delight in the accuracy of its sounds and betrayals.

Listen to Begum Akhtar singing this [Faiz Ahmed Faiz ghazal in Urdu](#).

Moments of intertextuality titillate and excite in this unapologetically diasporic, immigrant form as it speaks back to the poets Laurence Hope's (Adela Woodforde-Finden, 1902) epigraph, the Orientalism of "Kashmiri Song", and to both Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville. The poem "Kashmiri Song", written by a white woman in Britain, prized white supremacy as even the opening lines state "Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar,/Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell?"

Ali harnesses this form of South Asian song, the ghazal, to write his own Kashmiri song, except he writes it as a person displaced. A strategy that Ali masters is excerpting the language of the colonial power and the language of his new landscape (the neo-colonial power that is the United States) by placing himself firmly in a poetic conversation. By speaking against white women writing in his voice, he also implicated Emily Dickinson's own white supremacy through repurposing her words that at once make it new as well as surprise with their accuracy and poetic potential.

Dickinson's poem "I am ashamed—I hide—" (473) takes up the Orientalist tropes of an exotic Kashmir to beautify the white body—colonial entitlement in motion. Ali writes,

Those “Fabrics of Cashmere—” “to make Me beautiful—”  
“Trinket”—to gem— “Me to adorn—How tell”—tonight?

This act of re-appropriating her words, for Ali, then becomes a moment of resistance in the form. No longer are the “trinkets” of the Orient forced to bedeck Western bodies, instead Ali wrests the Koh-i-noor, the countless stolen temple gods back from the greedy hands of Empire. These intertextual moments shock and dazzle me as a reader; used words reordered make them feel new and spontaneous.

The last word of Ali’s ghazal— “tonight”—is a surprise as both a return to the formal constraints of the poem, ultimately the organizing principle for the poem, that brings the reader back into the logic of the couplets. The end of the quotation marks and the addition of Ali’s own voice in the last, familiar word “tonight” brings us into a different temporal construction where the speaker is in their own realm of time. In fact, because of the form, as readers we are listening for, waiting for, the new and devastating ways the poet will use the repetition and return of the last word and the rhyming penultimate word. It’s this anticipation that keeps us as readers grounded while foraying into the mysterious world of the poem. In South Asia, at this moment, you would be sure to hear *Wah Wah!* echo through the mushaira, the mehefil of poets assembled to hear the ghazals spoken aloud.

Another line that strikes me with mystery and its seeming spontaneity is the couplet:

God’s vintage loneliness has turned to vinegar—  
All the archangels—their wings frozen—fell tonight.

As I read it, I wonder on the creation of all things in the universe. According to some Judeo-Christian mythology, the Divine creates the world and humanity in order to no longer feel alone. We know how that ends up: the humans that Allah loves so much betray him to sin—even the archangels betray the Divine, consumed with their own desire for power. Is this a reference to Milton? And is this ultimately a reference to the Christian spiritual traditions? The idea of God’s loneliness as a wine that turns sour, for me, is unexpected given the strictures of Islam and Hinduism as practiced in South Asian communities. The same telltale intoxication of the Sufi, drunk on the Divine but to have a

Divine who prizes and guards their loneliness as a fine wine—shocks the follower either religious or not.

As soon as the ghazal opens we expect the closure, just as we expect that one day everything born or hatched will one day rush to its end. Here, Ali writes:

And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—  
God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight.

With the mention of the poet's name, we are called to this poem: its tradition and genre. There comes in this stanza an upturning of the roles of human and Divine. Shahid names himself, a name which means “the Beloved” or “witness”, as he states in his ghazal “In Arabic,” and places himself in the role of consoler of the Divine—a kind of liberation from the servant/slave, sinner/forgiver dynamic of Western spirituality.

The reference to Melville's story—the White Whale being read as a metaphor for the search for God—operates like a hinge, or rather an explosive which detonates in the readers' minds. Not only is Ali making allusion to this great questing after the Divine, or the Divine's quest for love of humans, but also alluding the relationships between Muslim and Jewish/Christian communities through his use of the Qur'anic figure Ishmael. Ishmael is, of course, the son of Ibrahim/Abraham blessed by God to be a “father of nations” as Isaac inhabits that role in Jewish and Christian mythology. Here, from my perspective, Ali says that he has escaped the tension, has a relationship with God that's beyond the strictures of religion, looking at the world and at the seekers, profoundly disturbed by what he sees tonight.

Can you imagine that one word, that one literary allusion, in the last line, can do all of this? For a single thought or couplet to be steeped in history, religion, American literature, poetry? I see this function of formal constraint to be both a liberation for a Kashmiri poetic and also a personal release for the poet—a personal release for me, specifically, with the multiple, complicated belongings that I have as a South Asian poet as well. This is the work of this immigrant form, Agha Shahid Ali's ghazal.

## The Zuihitsu

Similarly, the poet Kimiko Hahn does work to bring the zuihitsu form into cycle in the United States. Her claiming this form for her poetic practice is similarly one of decolonization: using a Japanese form to write in her complicated identities. Many readers will say that “there’s no such thing as identity” or attempt to steer clear of “identity politics”, a phrase used to dismiss poets of color and to further white supremacist ideas of an “unmarked subject” in poetry. For Hahn, the speaker is absolutely a complete person with an ethnic identity.

In the introductory poem “Compass” in *Narrow Road to the Interior* (W.W. Norton & Co. 2006), Hahn gives the rules and parameters for this poetic form, descended from Shōnagon’s *The Pillow Book*. To do so, Hahn quotes Donald Keene in *Seeds in the Heart*, and says, “Literally the zuihitsu, ‘follow[s] the impulse of the brush,’ and consist[s] of brief essays on random topics.”

Hahn expands on the lack in the definitions of form, indicating what the form has given her by way of a poetic:

None [of the definition’s que quotes] suggests an organizing principle—what we might call a theme. None comments on structural variety—list, dairy, commentary, essay, poem. Fragment. None offers that a sense of disorder might be artfully ordered by fragmenting, juxtaposing, contradicting, varying length or—even within a piece—topic. (Hahn 3)

Moreover, for a poet like Hahn, the zuihitsu is a way for a poet to expose moments of “borrowing” and intertextuality while following the associative nature of the mind. Everyone from Bashō, his translators Cid Corman and Kamaike Susumu, and Elizabeth Barret Browning, appear in the poem “Sparrow”—a clear example of the capacity of the zuihitsu form.

The poem begins with a quote from Bashō: “*The moon and sun are eternal travelers. Even the years wonder on. I always wonder about translations but can never recall enough Japanese. . . (26)*” to show her personal stakes, an interiority that she has and exposes: that of a woman, of a mixed-race Asian

American, educated in the United States with college-level Japanese language skills. There's a certain bravery in this admission, for an Asian American woman to have an interior life expressed through hybrid forms of poetry. The association between the Bashō quote and the speaker's own voice shows the levels of exactly how the poet will lead the reader as she traverses the narrow road to her own interior.

With a literal journey, a literal migration at the heart of this poetic form, the content also shows an emotional journey, through the end of love and into the beginning of new love. By following associations to the speaker's interiority, lyrical moments and prose are hybridized, each section following the emotional openness of the previous one. She writes,

Was marriage my imagination? I look at photos of cherry tanned profiles from little family vacations and cannot know what I was thinking.

\*

As after my mother's death, I walk around seeing objects from a haunted world: a child's easter dress, box of four crystal glasses, unopened package of men's t-shirts. A beach towel. The delightful ones pin me to sorrow. *That bird.* (27)

The first section of this excerpt leads into the next through the association of "a haunted world" presented as a list until the italicized portion—examining relics of a past life as the cohesion. The association between these sections is psychic in that it deals with the psyche, and the resonance that the form builds here is mysterious, accurate, and spontaneous, an organic representation of the working of memory through a list, pregnant with signification that makes emotional sense to the reader from the previous sections' mention of what remains—what can and cannot be translated. We as readers bear witness to the speaker's realizations as they happen, causing in us a similar response of wonder.

The speaker updates and questions Bashō, revealing a conversation that she is having, not with the gods of Western poetry, but of the ancestor-poet whose own journey influences the speaker to foray into her own forest. Hahn asks, "Is memory really against travel—as it selects which interior?" as though to prove the case of the formal conception of the *zuihitsu*, her update into the



multivalent “interior,” previously unimagined by Western readers, and also a journey into poetry in an American landscape.

Now to think on the last three words: “The delightful ones pin me to sorrow. *That bird.*” We can see how Kimiko Hahn creates space for her interior language, to encapsulate the specificity of the speaker’s memory. What I mean more precisely is that through subtle references to the words *sorrow* and *sparrow* and *sorry*, the poem’s closure stuns in its ultimate realization:

I could not return to the body that contained only the literal world.

Where *sparrow* does not suggest *sorrow*.

Where *sorrow* does not suggest *sorry*. (32)

Talk about explosion. The amalgamation of the sparrow and sorrow references in this poem brings a delight, an emotional rush by the time the reader notes the nuances and associations in the sounds of these English words. A foregrounded closure erupts into emotional sense through an amalgamation of namings and renamings of “sorrow” and “sparrow” throughout. The sonic similarities are not a mistake but are precisely placed within the poem to foreground the closure.

The *zuihitsu* is a matter of aesthetic practices that incorporate many kinds of forms: the list poem, the off-the-cuff essay, the mini-essay, etc. The Asian American Writers Workshop published [a folio of \*zuihitsu\*s here](#). You will see just how contemporary American writers have translated this form, migrating it from the explanations provided by Hahn, into English.

## IMMIGRANT FORM PROMPT

As Kimiko Hahn and Agha Shahid Ali show us, migrating a poetic form into English can provide a structure that allows for a nuanced accuracy, spontaneity, and mystery inherent to the history of the form. Working with the *zuihitsu* or the *ghazal* provides these poets a framework for entering and upsetting discourses they are thrust into. For me personally, I challenge myself to ask: what forms occur in my own cultural background? For me, it's Indo-Caribbean folksongs.

Find a folksong that you have a deep connection with. One that you grew up singing and dancing to, a folksong that your entire family knows. It doesn't have to be in a different language. Maybe it's a murder ballad, maybe it's a religious song—all that matters is that it's meaningful and that the song holds your personal and cultural histories, and that you migrate the formal constraints to your poem.

Now break the song's lyrics down into lineation, noting how many words and syllables are on each line. Now consider which of the folksong's poetic conventions you will keep. Will you keep the same rhyme scheme? Will you keep the same thematic thrusts?

When creating your form based on a folksong, are there any specific English language forms that you want to reference? Perhaps your version of the folksong poem has fourteen lines and echoes the sonnet. Maybe the return and repetition are inescapable in that it has a direct relationship with the villanelle. Whatever the case may be, this is one way to add another layer to the poetic constraints that you're thinking up.

Now that you've gotten the basics of your new form down, include the following:

- I. Consider a folksong that is important to you and your family/cultural inheritance.

2. Count out the syllables of the lyrics to provide a framework for understanding the structure of the song that you're migrating into a poetic form.
3. Write a poem that is based on the structure of this song.
4. Your poem must connect generations for your speaker. This can be through the inclusion of other languages. Feel free to use them or to even make up some words, or to use made-up words that are personal to you.
5. You must include layers that show your various dialects in conversation with one another. It would be most helpful if there is a cultural capital imbalance, meaning there is one language that is socially privileged over the other "non-standard" dialect.
6. Your poetic form must bear the weight of history, showing what language attrition and/or what passage of time looks like in poetry, specifically to your speaker.

## DEVIANT TRANSLATION PROMPT PT. 3

Take your “translation” from Part 2 and try to stretch into a new poem. Use the lines as jumping off points to inspire new lines.

- I. Think associatively when moving into a new poem.
  - a. As an example:
    - i. Take a line that says “My head hurts” and recast it into “The aspirin bitter of late morning”
    - ii. Take the line and rewrite it into even more precise language
  2. Is there anything that the poem in Part 2 was trying to express, some notion that you can recast only in images?
    - a. As an example:
      - i. “My head hurts” could become “Nausea and increased tempo of drum, the spinning room, pain’s white jasmine”
  3. Recast the entire poem in a series of images without explanation.

Is translation from one language into another actually possible, or are there thoughts and ephemeral beauties of linguistic nuances that resist representation and translation altogether, existing only in the *Weltanschauungen* of the original language? Is it possible to have a phoneme whose expression as allophone is only approximation? Is this the difference between orthodoxy and orthopraxy? Is faithfulness possible or are translators indeed faithless, traitors to the original text? I invite you: let’s be traitors together.

## TRANSLATIONS FROM THE NATURAL WORLD

I have never understood the umbrage that certain categories of poetry spawn in other. This is coded in violence and erasure: supremacy of one worldview over another. While I was drafting *Whale Aria*, I was inspired by Albert Wendt's essay "Tautauing the Postcolonial Body", and how he allows for the literary to exist outside of what the Western world imagines as literature. Other things can be read and interpreted with complete hermeneutical rigor that we in the West simply cannot fathom with our two-dimensional understandings of literature.

Even today, people will argue that oral traditions do not function in the world as literary productions. I think about this and it aggravates my postcolonial spirit. With this I started to look to songs I had no way of understanding from my own personal *Umwelt* and then into the deeper understanding of where my very human subtle-soul body guided me. I read deeply into my dreams of being swallowed by humpback whales, how they came to me at night, guiding me in that other world.

Woo woo? Yep.

But isn't poetry just that: the connection of the subconscious mind to the line? I found inspiration in the parsing out of humpback whale song from the article by E. Mercado III, L.M. Herman and A.A. Pack called "Stereotypical Sound Patterns in Humpback Whale Songs: Usage and Function", creating a pattern of humpback whale rhyme. Using ideas birthed from deep reading and research on the subject, I came across the work of Rebecca Giggs and Marth Southwick, who insist that regularization of song and its use of various dimensions (through the water column), is poetry. As this poetry echoes across the swaths of sea, it is extra-human, or more than human. My heart leapt as I learned just what makes the humpback whale a charismatic species. I decided to translate this into a poetic form to compel my poems into forward motion.

What outside of human language is interesting or inspiring to you? Have you had any dreams of the animal world that leads you into some kind of vibration

that you want to explore? If you are having a hard time with this, think of the guided meditation practice to open your mind's door. [Here's the link.](#)

Keep in mind that this is NOT your spirit animal, that for people outside of traditions where animals represent spiritual truths or journeys, this has the potential to be problematic and appropriative. The idea is to use the structures of the natural world to make meaningful art that extends beyond eco-aesthetics and considers a deeper meaning for how we as humans interact with the natural world.

## NATURAL WORLD TRANSLATION PROMPT

Fall down the rabbit hole of researching the communication of whatever animal, natural process, or environment draws you.

See if you can find some kind of communication structures or patterns that scientists have written about. Read several articles that show how these patterns can be understood in human terms. This doesn't have to look any particular way other than how you want it to look. The idea is to let the subconscious mind take over.

Sit by the river where you live. Listen to the water's rush. Translate this into a formal poem. What are the aspects of this form? Sound? Rhythm? Repetition?

Develop a structure for poetic creation that you will try to work in: develop constraints for yourself.

Write at least five poems in this form.

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[Read "Tautauing the Postcolonial Body"](#)

[Read "On Humpback Whale Song and Poetic Constraint"](#)

[Watch lectures by marine mammal biologists here.](#)

## DEVIANT TRANSLATION PROMPT PT. 4

Take the translation of Part 3 and use it to write a poem that is loosely “inspired” by the draft of Part 3. You can pick a formal poem and write another poem inspired by the draft of Part 3 in that form!

1. Write a ghazal that repurposes some of the lines of the original Part 3 draft.
2. Write a zuihitsu that expands the learning or leanings of Part 3.
3. Turn the next draft into a sonnet.
4. Turn the draft into a form of your own creation.

Keep doing this kind of rewriting again and again. Try to go for twenty retranslations!

At the end of this process what emerges will be your own work, haunted by the ghost of the original text. Is this influence? Homage? Theft? Translation? It blurs these distinctions of genre as such, producing work that can be liminal and expansive—something of this universe created of star matter and your own particular idioms and attitudes.



## BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

- Atmospheric Embroidery* by Meena Alexander  
*Wail Song* by Chaun Webster  
*When I Reach for Your Pulse* by Rushi Vyas  
*When My Mother Is Most Beautiful* by Rebecca Suzuki  
*Cane / Fire* by Shani Mootoo  
*Things You May Find Hidden in My Ear* by Mosab Abu Toha  
*Call Me Ishmael Tonight* by Agha Shahid Ali  
*Ghazal Cosmopolitan: The Culture and Craft of the Ghazal* by Shadab Zeest Hashmi  
*Narrow Road to the Interior* by Kimiko Hahn  
*Haji as Puppet: An Orientalist Burlesque* by Roger Sedarat  
*Of Marriage* by Nicole Cooley  
*Shehr-e-Janan / The City of the Beloved* by Adeeba Shahid Talukder  
*Cargo Hold of Stars* by Khal Torabully trans. Nancy Naomi Carlson  
*'Āina Hānau / Birth Land* by Brandy Nālani McDougall  
*Narcissus* by Andre Bagoo  
*City of Pearls* by Sham-e-Ali Nayeem  
*Beast at Every Threshold* by Natalie Wee  
*Recombinant* by Ching-In Chen  
*Some Animal* by Ely Shipley

from "Shall I Go Then?"

*a deviant translation*

Don't send me away  
and freeze my heart

In drink they lose their calm  
Prodding me daily

the woman bares all  
to the man

before the swing and then  
her thighs

There is no other way  
to say

he does knock she  
bad bad

\*

a bottle of rum  
a stick  
a swing  
adornments  
a small cottage  
a hard dick

एगो बटल रमवा के  
एगो लकड़ी  
एगो झूलवा  
सरिंगरिया  
एगो छोटी सी  
झोपड़िया  
एगो खड़ा लोलो

\*

my beloved's mother stabs me every day  
his greedy father drinks too much rum, every  
day, while she displays merchandise,  
the man's tongue drips with laugh —

\*

का सोचे है कि  
हम ओहर जाइबः

कब से पागल भइला तू  
दारू, मार-पीट,

बेसरम लोगान सब  
वहाँ रहेला

ससुर ससुइया के मारेला  
रोज रोज सबेरे सांझ तक

लक्ड़िया के लाठी से या  
खड़ा लण्ड से मारेला

\*

Why would I go? What frightens me  
the drinking, the beatings,  
the lack of boundaries and drawstrings—

the doting on men and in return  
their thrashing of women  
with either sticks or erections

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Poet, memoirist, and translator, **Rajiv Mohabir** is the author of four books of poetry including *Cutlish* (Four Way Books 2021) which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and recipient of the Eric Hoffer Medal Provocateur. His poetry and nonfiction have been finalists for the 2022 PEN/America Open Book Award, the Lambda Literary Award in Poetry and in Nonfiction, the Randy Shilts Award for Gay Nonfiction, and both second place and finalist for the Guyana Prize for Literature in 2022 (poetry and memoir respectively). His translations have won the Harold Morton Landon Translation Award from the American Academy of Poets in 2020. *Whale Aria* (Four Way Books 2023) is his fourth collection of poetry and currently he is an assistant professor of poetry at the University of Colorado Boulder.

