

**BARON
WENCKHEIM'S
HOMECOMING
LÁSZLÓ
KRASZNAHORKAI**

László Krasznahorkai
*Baron Wenckheim's
Homecoming*

Trans. Otilie Mulzet. New York. New Directions. 2019. 576 pages.

It is revealing to consider why this book fails so spectacularly—especially given the sustained astonishment László Krasznahorkai's previous novels evoke, notably *Satantango* and *Seiobo There Below*.

Satantango, Krasznahorkai's 1987 debut, was an act of giddy, laconic defiance not only of literary convention but also wildly in the face of the politics of its day—critical of Soviet socialist culture from within, in a way never seen. The eponymous film by director Béla Tarr (seven and a half hours long), finally finished in 1994, towers above anything of the period. It's not just a masterpiece, it stands as a last great artifact of uniquely eastern European high culture, at a time of dizzying transition—relentlessly exploding tropes of the old system, yet wary of what is to come.

Seiobo There Below, completed just before the 2008 crash, is another milestone. In endless peregrinations, this work

yet radiates a solid, finished, somehow poetic wholeness—retained in Otilie Mulzet's superb translation. A logical peak of Krasznahorkai's trajectory, it is also justly celebrated.

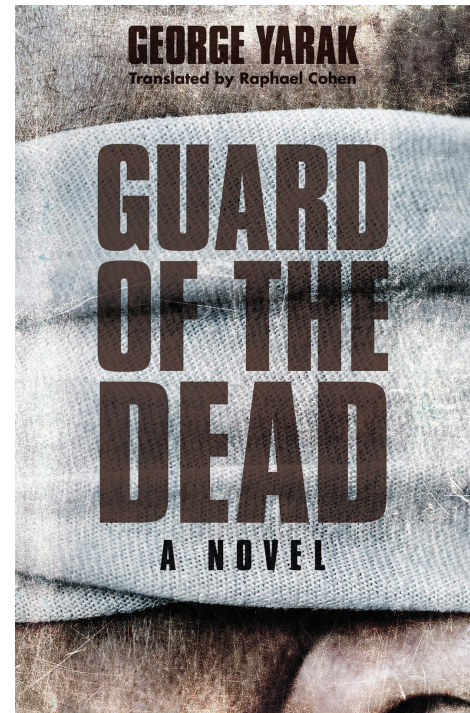
In this light, *Baron Wenckheim's Homecoming*, written originally in 2016, falls on the side of tedious; its prose falls about in self-precious fits and starts. It may admittedly be unfair to hold an author to the standards of his greatest achievements, and certainly there are passages here where the work shines. It's impossible to sample this here, since the effect is cumulative, with sentences spanning pages. Some sections even break through to a sustained absurdity worthy of Beckett. Krasznahorkai can be a master stylist; there are even startlingly wise lessons hiding in this work—yet the overall execution feels lazy, like a draft.

It's probably also no fault of the translator that the work's self-abnegating, often pedestrian tone and boring word choice works better in Hungarian. In English, so much of it just sounds like this: "oh, stammered out Feri, but the great commander would never hear of him again, because he was going to lead a quiet life, indeed even up until now he'd led a quiet life, never even hurting a fly, and he was speaking seriously now, throughout his whole life not even one little fly, and well, it was another matter altogether that his life had been difficult and full of many tragedies—well, no mind, said the great commander, and Feri clammed up, as he saw now that he didn't want him to talk, the main thing was for there to be a good ending to this whole horror story, and that's how it concluded . . ." And so on for hundreds of pages. As Hungarian culture continues to chart its own path, it's possible this work's faux political outrage as well as its prevaricating and smelly old-world charm remain relevant there. If so, that's a sad metacommentary—but not sufficient reason for us to read it.

Some may suggest this book is a pinnacle of Krasznahorkai's oeuvre. It is not. Why not take the time instead to read the author's previous volumes, or something

else important or beautiful? Finally, it is reflective of how much the ground may have shifted beneath our feet, that we may no longer have this much time to waste, sifting through muck looking for the gems.

Andrew Singer
Trafika Europe



George Yarak
Guard of the Dead

Trans. Raphael Cohen. Cairo. Hoopoe Press. 2019. 269 pages.

It is easy to fall in love with Beirut—the blue Mediterranean shimmers in the evening and the joie de vivre of the Lebanese charms visitors. But, as one of our Lebanese friends commented five or six years ago, “The cracks are not so far below the surface.” Born in 1958, journalist and novelist George Yarak is old enough to have experienced the civil war caused by the sectarian fissures in Lebanese society.

His novel *Guard of the Dead* is a psychological tale that gives us a disturbing picture of the underbelly of war-torn Beirut in the late 1970s. The naive narrator, Abir, a hunt-

Books in Review

ed man, takes us on a harrowing tour: the thuggish, violent world of the militias; the depravity of the nightclubs; the prevalent recurrence of coincidental and intended death; the corruption within a hospital and the grisly details of dismembered corpses in a morgue. The novel is a blend of roman à clef and dystopian fable with thriller—and is told by an observant, perceptive narrator and propelled by a tight plot. *Guard of the Dead* was shortlisted for the International Prize in Arabic Fiction. It certainly deserved this recognition.

Other recent novels set in Iraq—like *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, by Ahmed Saadawi, and *The Corpse Washer*, by Sinan Antoon—have dealt with similar issues of sectarian violence, war, dismembered corpses, and honorable burial. Yarak's narrator, Abir, does not find refuge in black humor,

like the narrator of Sadaawi's novel—for Yarak's narrator, the only light seems to come from the friendship and camaraderie of other soldiers and a fleeting affair with a friend at work.

One of the novel's strengths is the first-person narrator, haunted by trauma and besieged by suspicion and paranoia. The novel begins when Abir finds a wounded man in a garbage dump, his face covered with blood. Later, he learns that a gang from an unnamed political party wanted to take revenge on a teacher and ended up murdering a man. Afraid that he will be implicated in the murder, he flees to Beirut. In desperate need of a job, he joins a militia, and because he is a good shot, he is assigned the job of sniper. Yarak does not mention particular sectarian groups

or specific events of the war but leaves that vague—perhaps underscoring that one battle is like another, just as one sectarian group behaves like all the rest. Throughout the novel, people are not named, either, but go by their nicknames, which are often ironic. The names are masks, but people are also masked throughout the novel—identity is not fixed. Abir's nickname in the militia is "Ittris," which is a male plover, while he is nicknamed "guard of the dead" when he works in the morgue.

Despite the fact that Abir is a sniper, he is not an aggressive, nasty character. Instead of killing people randomly, Abir shoots at signs. Once he witnesses the robbery and murder of a jeweler, he realizes the operation has nothing to do with military orders. Later, he goes along to a nightclub as an adventure but is shocked by the depraved

ROBERT BLY

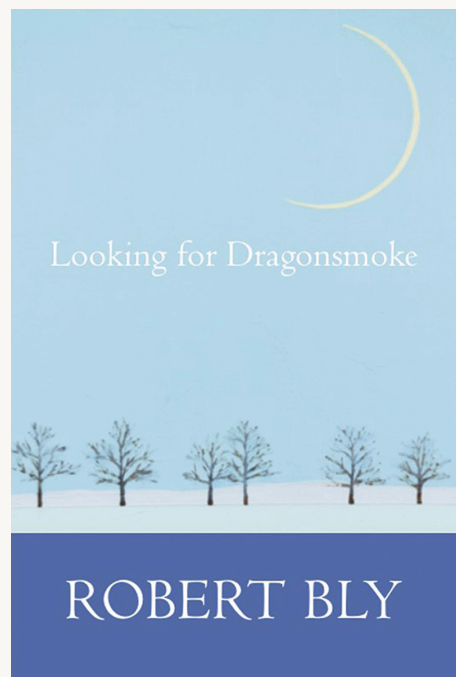
Robert Bly

Looking for Dragon Smoke: Essays on Poetry

Buffalo, New York. White Pine Press.
2019. 299 pages.

At age ninety-two, Robert Bly is releasing simultaneously his *Collected Poems* and his collected essays, *Looking for Dragon Smoke*, which would be ominous if not for the sheer abundance of his life's work. In the latter volume, we have his sixteen most important essays, written from 1977 to 2005, though mostly in the 1980s and 1990s. The book is divided into four sections, but the essays really fall into only two categories: essays on poetry and poetics and essays on specific writers, mostly poets.

The best of the discussions about writers are probably the ones on Rilke, Machado, and Thoreau. In these, Bly goes beyond demonstrating the application of his poetics to the work in question, which is interesting in itself and which often tells us as much or more about Bly as it does about the work. In these three best essays, he includes a greater



mix of pertinent biographical data, wide reading, and philosophical exploration. For example, in the discussion of Thoreau, we may on the same page encounter observations by Coleridge and Melville, a relevant quotation from Descartes, an excerpt from Thoreau's journal, and a philosophical

offering of Bly's own, such as the following: "Since the physical world conceals or embodies a spiritual world, if one studies facts in nature, one might be able to deduce or distill from many physical facts a spiritual fact." The effect is to draw the reader into Bly's own complex understanding alternately with facts, observations, and disputable assertions. Readers may not always agree with Bly, but they are likely to be engaged by him.

The title of this book (also the title of its second essay) draws from the ancient Chinese image of poets as riding dragons, trailing smoke. Looking for evidence of this smoke, which is a sign of poetic authenticity and power, is Bly's ongoing stated purpose and the thread that stitches these disparate essays together. Appropriately, Bly begins with his essay "Six Disciplines That Intensify Poetry" and enumerates six areas for discussion, areas he calls delight in metaphor, friendships between sounds, psychic weight, natural form, poetic excess, and heart speech. What he means by these things takes him thirty-five pages to explain in his own idiosyncratic way of viewing poetry, which

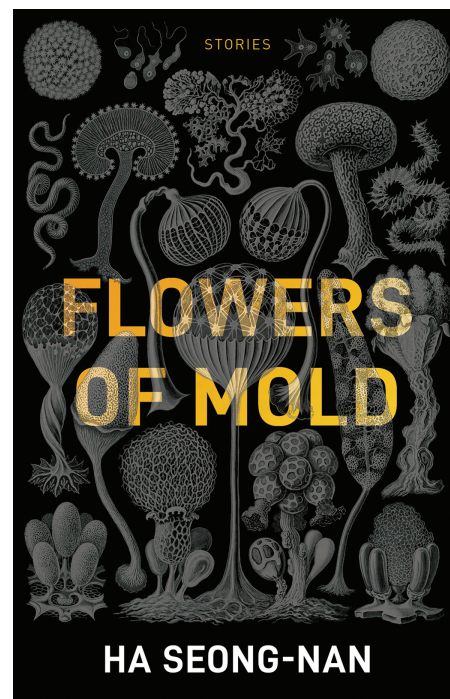
behavior of Domino, another strongman. Abir is not involved in the action at the nightclub but only observes this jungle of bullies, thugs, and strongmen. He is a sympathetic young kid, curious about the world around him, but he does not try to counter or stop violence either. In no way does Yarak glamorize the world of the militias, but he does describe the strongmen and the ugly sideshows that go along with their military operations: looting, rape, gambling, addiction and mafia-style murders.

For Abir, the only relief in this grim atmosphere is his friendship with Azizi, who is a thoughtful, self-taught man who reads political and history books, listens to music, and prepares leisurely meals in his simple room. Azizi has recorded “secrets” of the militia in a notebook—and Abir’s name is mentioned. After Azizi’s murder,

Abir flees and goes underground, fearful that he will be next. At first, the hospital run by nuns seems an ideal place to hide, but it is no haven from terror, paranoia, and corruption either. Like an onion, the layers of corruption are revealed, day by day: negligent doctors kill patients; casual, sleazy affairs are rife; employees defraud the hospital with scams, pilfer petty cash from the drawer, and scavenge valuables off of corpses. Abir finds himself sympathizing with the corpses, especially of ordinary and poor people—death is the great equalizer.

Yarak crafts a poignant, if not kind, end to the book as Abir’s ultimate fate echoes the events that set it into motion.

Gretchen McCullough
American University in Cairo



Ha Seong-nan
Flowers of Mold: Stories

Trans. Janet Hong. Rochester, New York.
Open Letter. 2019. 212 pages.

Flowers of Mold, *Mouthful of Birds*, *Apple and Knife*, *The Night Circus*, *Alphaland*, *Mars*—these are just a few of the surrealist collections by women writers from around the world that have been published in the last two years. Whether the authors write in Korean, Spanish, Indonesian, or any other language, their stories teeter on the edge of the fantastic, guiding readers into seemingly mundane narratives only to rip the rug out from under us to expose reality’s dark underbelly. One wonders if this trend is due to the anglophone world demanding more of these stories in English or if this kind of story is a reflection of the zeitgeist. Either way, surrealist stories like those in Ha Seong-nan’s *Flowers of Mold* invite us to look at our world anew and take notice of the nameless people we pass on the street each day. Like *The Vegetarian*—another surreal and haunting text by a Korean woman—*Flowers of Mold* unsettles and unnerves, effortlessly. Here we should

is an admixture of the universal and the partisan. His sheer intelligence and uniqueness make him worth reading, but as he seeks to explain and defend his views, he sometimes doesn’t seem aware of the vulnerability of his assumptions, stated as facts. For example, while casting a disapproving eye on certain formal poets of the 1950s, he describes their use of metrical lines and end-rhyme as machinelike, which then allows him to conflate poetic form with social form and the politics of the era, not conscious, seemingly, of the excess of the 1960s (his own formation time) and its excess as a reaction to the hysterical conformity of the 1950s, which itself was a reaction to the chaos and total breakdown in world order of the 1940s. Effective poetic form evolves from the qualities of the language and our brains’ needs and preferences in processing information, a topic too involved to develop here.

A more egregious example is found in Bly’s essay “A Wrong Turning in American Poetry,” which is generally interesting and well developed in a successive comparison of “good” and “bad” verse. In it, he quotes five lines from Elizabeth Bishop’s “At the Fish-

houses” as bad poetry, stating, “The facts of the outer world push out the imagination and occupy the poem themselves. The lines become inflexible. The poem becomes heavy and stolid, like a toad that has eaten ball bearings.” Bly seems to completely miss and misunderstand Bishop’s use of image, which is stunning for a poet of Bly’s renown. Bishop’s work, nowhere better than in this poem, is most perfectly realized when she locates those images that stand as the literal and metaphorical simultaneously, the physical and the metaphysical simultaneously. To read Bishop’s poetry is to read billegally simultaneously.

Fortunately, Bly’s contentious style seldom disappoints to this extent. Instead, it mostly delights in nearly three hundred pages as we witness an original talent work to explain and demonstrate a new world, the world according to Bly. Isn’t this in some way what all great talents do?

Fred Dings
University of South Carolina