

Brenda Hillman Homophonic Translation Exercise

There is some debate over who was first. Some say Louis Zukovsky, but the notion of deriving inspiration for a poem from another language, one you DO NOT SPEAK can lead to some surprise mind moments. Ted Berrigan's "I'll fart in one ear" was a hit in my older daughter's 6th grade poetry anthology that she had to assemble back in the day and she got an A+ as I recall though I'm sure the teacher didn't know what to make of that line.

Louis and Celia Zukofsky's "version" of Catullus 70:

CATULLUS 70

Nulli se dicit mulier mea nubere malle
quam mihi, non si se Iuppiter ipse petat.
dicit: sed mulier cupido quod dicit amanti,
in vento et rapida scribere oportet aqua.

Zukofskys (1969):

Newly say dickered my love air my own would marry me all
whom but me, none see say Jupiter if she petted.
Dickered: said my love air could be o could dickered a man too
in wind o wet rapid a scribble reported in water.

"But Brenda Hillman writes in English" you say and you'd be right. Here's where the fun comes in. Let's take a poem from Middle Brenda, page 75 of *In A Few Minutes Before Later* to start:

In Some Senses of the Word



The spirits stand round
in their bristly ovals. They don't
really know what to do. A bobcat
hunts on the oblong
hill, its tan hunger ruffling
the saturn grasses. A day
brings velvet fog to the warm
ground. The wren with the *n*
at the edge of its nest
makes all sounds eat
from earth while lost things turn
& circulate. Stuck

in your golden thought, dreaming
of apocalypse or blood, you call
to the dead, not sure now.
You call to the body, much closer than
a place. Your brain makes a chant:

*At the edge of a wood
it will know where to turn
At the edge of the world
they might know we're to turn
At the edge of the word
we may know where to turn*

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Notice how that second use of the word “edge” in the closing chant is not italicized. Does Saturn have grasses? (It may have its own day of the week if you consider its etymology.) What would be the favorite food of sounds if they do in fact “eat” as Brenda suggests here? She gives permission to

be weird (which means permission to be yourself) in everything she does, so run with it.

YOUR TASK is to copy and paste this poem into an online translator. Google Translate works for me. Change Brenda's poem into a different language, one which you do not speak or read, and then at least a second. Take that second translation and write a poem using phrases from that. You have to change the language setting at the top (using the Google translator) so that it knows what you're talking about when you send it to it's second, third and other iterations, but get one version you think you can work from and see if you can be consistent with words that are obviously the same. What sounds do you get from those letters which you do not understand? Of course our personal myth comes though just like the guy in the old joke about Rorschach Tests. One commentor on the Language Hat website 20 years ago said: "You can get a fun approximation by spell-checking a foreign text with an English dictionary in your favorite word processor, and accepting the first suggestion. This is not science, or journalism. You should have fun with this and feel liberated or maybe a little high when you finish.



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Works Cited

<https://languagehat.com/homophonic-translation/>

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<https://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Zukofsky-Catullus-excerpt.html>

<https://www.etymonline.com/word/Saturn>

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