

**When Kisses Were Breakfast and Dinner:**  
*Poems by Vasyl Makhno*  
*Translated from Ukrainian by Olena Jennings*



Today, National Translation Month continues with new translations from the Ukrainian. We're delighted to share four poems **by the acclaimed poet Vasyl Makhno translated by the accomplished translator and poet, Olena Jennings**. These beautiful poems will take you on a lyrical trip from New York to California, a reminder of life before Covid-19 “when kisses were breakfast and dinner.” We hope you’ll like them as much as we do.

We’d love to hear from you! Follow us on Twitter [@TranslateMonth](#), tag us [@TranslateMonth](#) and share using [#TranslationMonth](#), join our mailing list, submit a translation month event, or like our [Facebook](#) page. We hope you’ll join us and celebrate your favorite translations of writers from all over the world in September and beyond.

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

## NETTLE

I know the nettle will blossom late: rains  
I forgot aunt's keys to the house  
no one looked for me – even the women  
earth worms left behind their larvae  
dill and potatoes were planted in the fields  
I wasn't there –for one or the other

I hid in the city I loved  
for or even because of  
chestnut candelabras – fluffy cotton  
mother of pearl flies buzzing  
passing trains sway yellow milkweed  
and swarming bees and sweet strawberries

my mother waited for me and my father the guide  
they sat along the shore, near the water  
almost by Bergman's "Wild Strawberries"  
my mother's smile was so distant  
I hid behind the trunk of an old pine  
and looked: is it them or isn't it?

I hid in the thicket of green nettle  
I moved into the nettle to smoke  
I chewed the nettle, I was afraid of my mother  
who traced my foxlike footprints  
and the blood of the nettle – green and greasy  
her eyes scanning for me and the river

early rains above the city and the river  
and on my blue heart scars and bruises  
the rain showed me no mercy but the nettle did  
my mom called to me from the river with concern:  
if you smoke you won't grow properly  
and you won't be able to carry a river of memory

## MAGNOLIA

I showed you that evening rose from the mountains  
this is California – baby – give her a heart  
“what should we have for dinner” “California winter”  
“I think we’ve already reached LA”  
“just yesterday a petal of the magnolia was in the jar  
and we don’t have anything left for dinner”

“then we will have the shadows of magnolia petals for dinner  
hungry we made it to California somehow  
when kisses were breakfast and dinner?  
we looked for cheap gas – the shadow of a young cactus  
we prepared for this trip a long time  
and you promised to be good”

“the ocean is restless – look – some gray martins  
they don’t have sheets – they don’t have a comforter  
they don’t even have a rusty Chevy  
or even a roof over their heads or a stray dog”  
“don’t bother me – I finished the poem”  
“I’ll cut some bread – we don’t even have a knife”

“it’s cold here – you say – I thought it was much warmer”  
you tie up your hair – skillfully hook your bra  
and you scurry around like a chicken – looking for missing lipstick  
“maybe in the city of angels people live like birds?  
good job – you smile – don’t ever enter a monastery”  
“and what’s with the magnolia? and thanks for your advice”

and at dinner again the kiss lingers  
California air that makes you sick to your stomach  
the hum of the motor – your fabled California  
“and this cool story. imagine that – you and I  
who would believe it? tell me? and then there’s the magnolia  
and the continuously playing Hotel California”

## RAIN IN NEW YORK

yesterday it rained and today it is raining  
I kept a light on until midnight – because the rain didn't sleep  
I looked at your freckles in the photo  
the olives of your eyes, my raspberry bush  
is full of thrushes again, fighting  
rustling about like sand in a kidney

and I rustled papers, read about Judah  
I swore to you and to God that I wouldn't  
get up at 3am anymore to write  
these twenty poems about you, for you  
I know that in our home it's dark  
but we don't have a home – so what is there to complain about?

I also read in the rain in Washington Square:  
the pages got wet – the wind tore at the poems  
I strained my memory because I forgot the lines  
tightly held an umbrella in my left hand  
you were that rain and prolonged storm  
a cold cough and a bracelet from your wrist

well yesterday it rained again  
I drew a circle for my youngest daughter  
I didn't get through to the older one – long dial tones  
and so: I read the book of rain and thrushes  
and also amber freckles and you  
and the color of your hair like a river of clay

I closed the book, inserted a piece of paper as a bookmark  
turned off the light, loosened my tie  
felt the house and electrical wires trembling  
and the New York rain seeped through my collar  
and why does it prick the heart like a needle?  
And why isn't your star visible above the house?

## 10,000 DOORS

I wrote the 13<sup>th</sup> line for you  
then water approached and I couldn't make it  
because how can you walk on shattering water  
and you said to me: "come on, come on"  
I'm not afraid – I will go  
because everyone has a guiding star

You said: "let's jump  
and hold on to me in the air  
we'll fly like thrushes"  
I asked: "where are you going? what flight?"  
but the path was illuminated  
by the light from the star

and if there is guiding star in your mind  
and if life is like military service  
and if a leg is only for stockings  
I'll follow you over this water  
I believe in the star  
If you have your coat on then I do too

I will repair the rotting roof of the house  
I will repay my loans – I owe a few drachmas  
I will feed the thrushes – finish the poem  
start the Volkswagen at midnight  
collect my belongings  
I have arrived I'll say – let me in

"I've arrived – I say – walked on the water  
you said that everyone had a guiding star  
did you forget what you said"  
you laugh: "you are such a fool  
in my heart there are 10,000 doors  
but in the one where you're standing – I waited"

## About the author



**VASYL MAKHNO** was born in Chortkiv, Ternopil oblast, in 1964. He is a poet, prose writer, essayist, and translator. He is the author of twelve collections of poetry. His most recent collection, *A Poet, Ocean, and Fish*, appeared in 2019. He has also published two books of essays: *The Gertrude Stein Memorial Cultural and Recreation Park* (2006) and *Horn of Plenty* (2011), and two plays: *Coney Island* (2006) and *Bitch/Beach Generation* (2007). Makhno translated Zbigniew Herbert's

and Janusz Szuber's poetry from Polish into Ukrainian, and edited an anthology of young Ukrainian poets from the 1990s. His poems and essays have been translated into twenty-five languages. His books published in Israel, Poland, Romania, Serbia and USA. His poems and essays appeared in English in *Absinthe*, *Agni*, *Consequences*, *Post Road*, *Poetry International*, and others. Two poetry collections, *Thread and Other New York Poems* (2009) and *Winter Letters* (2011), were published in English translation. He is the 2013 recipient of Serbia's Povele Morave Prize in Poetry and BBC Book of the Year Award 2015. Makhno lives in New York. Photo by Ivan Polyvoda.

## About the translator



**OLENA JENNINGS** is the author of poetry chapbooks *Songs from an Apartment* and *Memory Project*. Her translation from Ukrainian of Iryna Shuvalova's poetry collection, *Pray to the Empty Wells*, in collaboration with the author, was released in 2019 by Lost Horse Press. Her translation, together with Oksana Lutsyshyna, of Artem Chekh's *Absolute Zero* is forthcoming from Glagoslav in July. She is the founder and curator of the Poets of Queens reading series. Photo by Dimitri Keungueu.