

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 13th 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.