

# ***A NEW FUTURE OF TRANSLATION***

A DIGITAL ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION



***MIRACLE MONOCLE***

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## WHY TALK ABOUT TRANSLATION?

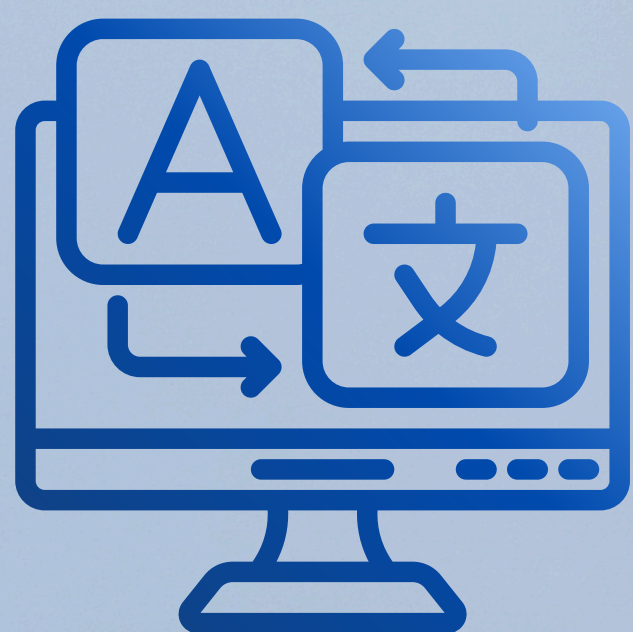


In an increasingly divisive, technology-ruled world, human connection is needed now more than ever. Exploring the art of poetry translation presents a unique opportunity to interrogate a field at the crossroads of these modern issues.

We sat down with three poets, scholars, and translators to explore the past, present, and future of this important industry—and hopefully gain a fuller understanding of the importance of the work they are doing all around us.







# CONTRIBUTORS



**ARIEL FRANCISCO HENRIQUEZ COS** is the author of *All the Places We Love Have Been Left in Ruins* (Burrow Press, 2024), *Under Capitalism If Your Head Aches They Just Yank Off Your Head* (Flowersong Press, 2022), *A Sinking Ship is Still a Ship* (Burrow Press, 2020), and *All My Heroes Are Broke* (C&R Press, 2017) which was named one of the 8 Best Latino Books of 2017 by Rigoberto Gonzalez. He is also the translator of Haitian-Dominican poet Jacques Viau Renaud's *Poet of One Island* (Get Fresh Books, 2024), Guatemalan poet Hael's Lopez's *Routines/Goodbyes* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2022), and Colombian poet Carolina Sanchez's *Viaje/Voyage* (Editorial Ultramarina, 2020). His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New Yorker Podcast*, *Poetry Magazine*, *The Academy of American Poets Poem-a-Day*, *The Rumpus*, *The New York City Ballet*, *Performance Today*, *American Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. He's an Assistant Professor of Poetry at Louisiana State University.

**JOHN JAMES** is the author of *The Milk Hours* (Milkweed, 2019), selected by Henri Cole for the Max Ritvo Poetry Prize, as well as three chapbooks, most recently *Extinction Song* (Tupelo, 2026), winner of the Snowbound Chapbook Award. Recent poems appear in *New England Review*, *The Hopkins Review*, *LARB Quarterly*, *Poem-a-Day*, and elsewhere, and his work has been supported by fellowships and awards from the Bread Loaf Environmental Writers Conference, the Academy of American Poets, and the Lannan Center for Poetics and Social Practice at Georgetown University. He holds an MFA in poetry from Columbia and is completing a PhD in English at the University of California, Berkeley.

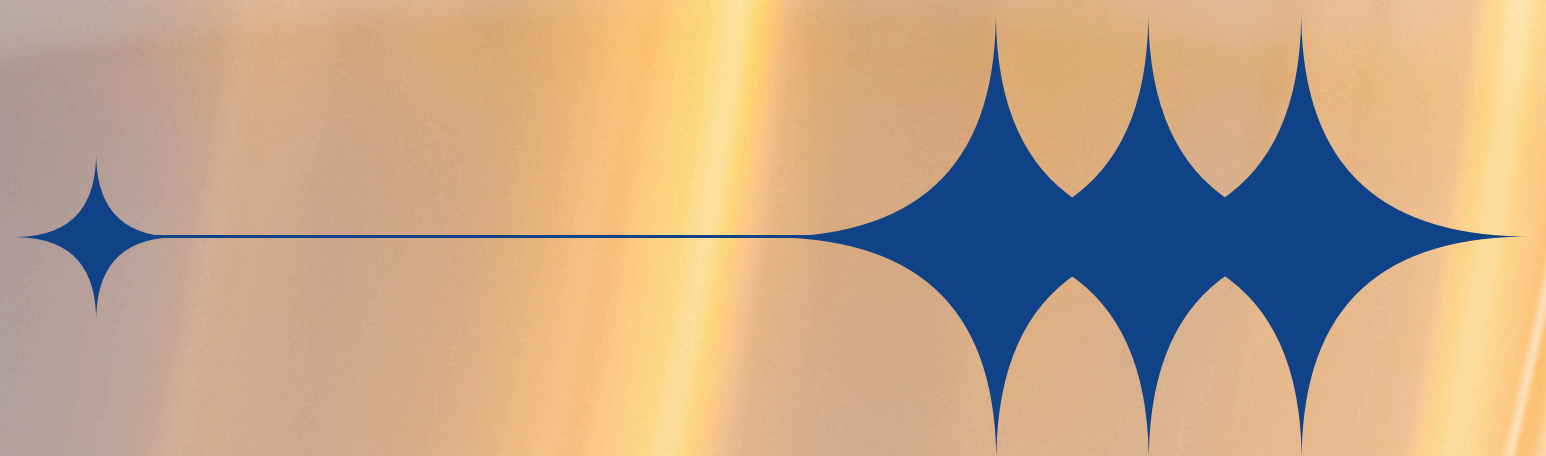




# CONTRIBUTORS, CONTINUED



**JEREMY PADEN** is a poet, translator, and professor of Spanish at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. He writes in both English and Spanish and translates into and out of both. He is the author of several books of poems in English and Spanish. His illustrated and bilingual children's book *Under the Ocelot Sun* (Shadelandhouse Modern Press, 2020) co-won the Campoy-Ada Prize for Illustrated Children's Books awarded by the North American Academy of the Spanish Language. As a translator, he has translated poets from almost all Latin American countries, Spain, and the United States. Among his recent books is *world as sacred burning heart* (3: A Taos Press, 2021). His Spanish language translation of Ada Limón's *De las que duelen* was just recently published (Valparaíso Ediciones, 2024) and his English language translation of Mario Meléndez's *Waiting for Perec* will be published this fall by Action, Spectacle.



## ROUNDTABLE MODERATOR

**ARIANA ALVARADO** is a graduate student at the University of Louisville, studying for her Master of Arts in English. She received her Bachelor of Arts in English with minors in Creative Writing and Theology from Bellarmine University in May 2024. In the Spring of 2025, she served as a Graduate Editor of *Miracle Monocle* for Issue 24. Her research interests include fan studies, communications and social media, post-colonial literature and theory, and theology and religious studies. Her poetry has been featured by Sarabande Books and Cider Press Review, among others.





**AA: First, what is the importance of your translation work? What overall goals do you strive toward in every piece of translation?**




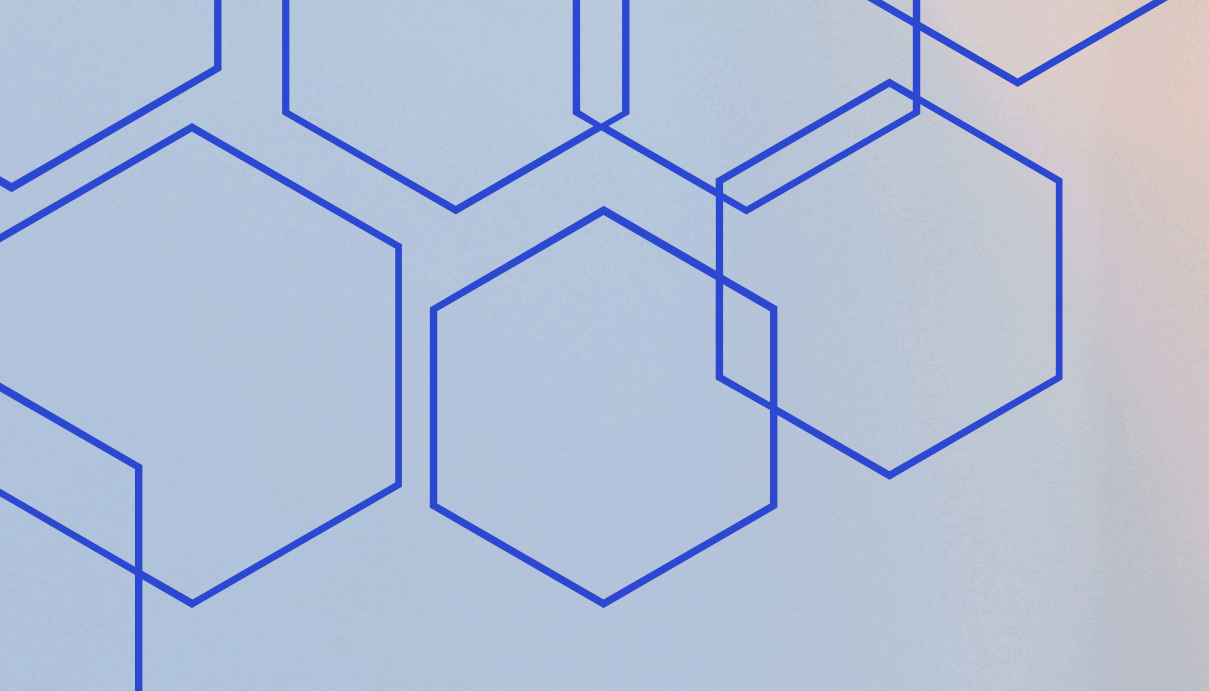
**AF:** The broad importance of my translation work is primarily to bring Latin American poetry and poets into English for the first time and enrich the readership of poetry in translation. Translations from Spanish have a long history of influence in American poetry (think Neruda, Lorca, Vallejo) and it's a joy to try and contribute to that. What I strive for in every piece of translation is to try and replicate the reception/reaction that a reader in the original language would have. I often tell my translation students: imagine two readers side by side reading at the same pace—one is reading the original poem and the other is reading your translation: if they react in the same way at the same moments (gasp, laugh, etc.), it's a successful translation.




**JJ:** In all translations, I aim to strike a balance between fidelity to the original text and creating a compelling artefact for the reader. This requires a keen understanding of the original, with all of its semantic nuance, but also an ability to play with that language, which—inevitably—will not come into language neatly, and certainly not in any kind of analogic relationship to the source text. The challenge, then, is to create a text-object that feels and sounds like the original author, rather than the translator, even though the translator is the one (re)creating the piece.







**JP:** Translation is extremely important to my work. In fact, it is extremely important to all modern literature. For the German polymath Johan Wolfgang von Goethe once noted, “If left to itself every literature will exhaust its vitality, if it is not refreshed by the interest and contributions of a foreign one.” Current scholarship, and rightly so, has questioned the Colonialist and Eurocentric nature of Goethe’s construction of World Literature, yet there remains something true to that idea: translations of Petrarch into English, Spanish, German, French, and other languages in the 16th century transformed the national literatures of that era and introduced the sonnet. Translations of Asian poetry and Ancient Greek poetry at the turn of the 20th century were key to the revitalization brought about by Imagism. Translations of Whitman and Poe into French played a key role in changes to late 19th century French poetry that led to some of the changes introduced by Baudelaire and the subsequent Avant Garde. Likewise, the revitalization of US poetry in the 60s carried out by poets, like W. S. Merwin, James Wright, and Galway Kinnell, among others, was deeply tied to their work as translators. For me, translation plays a key role in me developing my own voice as a poet. Mostly, I strive to be as faithful as possible to the poem while also ensuring that the poem in translation is also a poem.





## AA: What are some of the biggest challenges you generally face in the translation process? How do you overcome these challenges?

**AF:** From a nuts and bolts perspective, the variations in Spanish from different countries can vary quite a bit. For reference, I have translated poetry from Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Haiti. Specific and different uses of certain words, slang, colloquialism, these are often a bit challenging as researching not just definitions but particular specific usages can be tricky. Is it a regional usage? Is it from a particular time period? It sometimes requires an unspecified/mysterious amount of research, which can be frustrating at times.

**JJ:** There are a few. The first is, of course, the goal I've outlined above: to generate a new text-object that also somehow accurately reflects the original. The other, for me at least, has been anxiety about my own language skills. While I have a strong background in Romance languages, including Spanish, French, and Portuguese, and know some German and Latin, I'm not quite fluent in any of these languages. (Who, though, is fluent in Latin?) Even where I am most comfortable, which is in French, I would be embarrassed to have a conversation with a moderately intelligent adult. But I do have a real eye for poetic nuance. That is to say, because I am such an avid reader of poetry, and—not to toot my own horn—a pretty keen close reader, I am actually quite good at attending to enjambments, puns, and other forms of sound play. I'm also (I think) a decent poet in my own right, so I feel fairly confident that, even in a language I haven't totally mastered, as long as I have a working knowledge of it, I can translate a poem—especially a shorter poem—with that crucial balance of accuracy and creativity.

**JP:** It is really very easy to misunderstand a turn of phrase, especially if the poet uses slang or witticisms or local terms. Another challenge is that Spanish is freer with its syntax than English. The use of hyperbatons can be frequent. And, while this isn't a terrible problem most of the time, sometimes I find myself, at least, over reading and placing hyperbatons where they aren't. Another challenge can be homonyms and choosing the correct word from an assortment of many. Just today I was translating a poem that used the term *encarnar*. Given the context I thought it meant scar over; the poet had meant it, however, in the sense of *embody* and *embed* or *in-grow*. Thankfully, they corrected me.





**AA: On a bigger scale, what are some of the broader issues within the world of translation right now that aren't being talked about outside of the translation community, and how do you see them playing out in your work?**

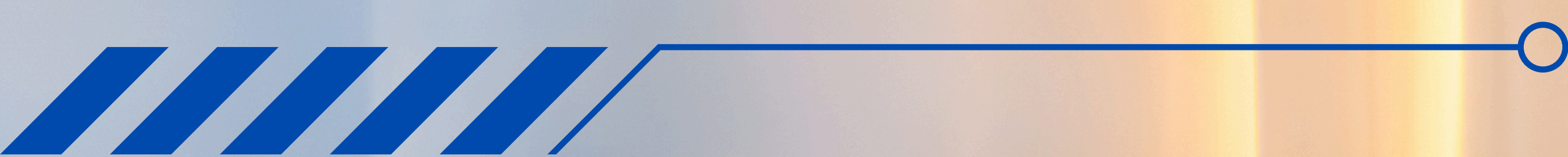
**AF:** Honestly, one of the big issues I have is that not enough people are doing it. It's such a straightforward way of bringing in and representing your culture, your family's place of origin, etc. If you're a bilingual writer, why aren't you translating? Especially right now, with so much anti-immigration policies and squashing of diversity efforts. Translation is a middle finger to ignorance, monolingualism, and fascism. A smaller issue I have is how little translation comes from our closest neighbors, the Caribbean and Central America. I'm personally trying to put a dent in that.



**JJ:** I think it is the other way around: the translation community is talking about issues pertaining to the wider culture, though ones some sects of our society might prefer to rebut or ignore. For instance, what are the cultural dynamics of translating a poet of a different race or ethnic background? How is this dynamic complicated in light of diaspora or settler colonialism? Do these dynamics reproduce themselves within a translation, and how can a translator adjust, avoid, or otherwise revise that dynamic? Does everybody have the right to translate any poem? (Clearly, not everybody has the right to publish every translation, particularly if the translated poet is alive.) It is important to remember, as Foucault reminds us, that power is relational—that it is formed in the interaction between entities. Certainly, the act of taking up and interacting with a source text produces such a dynamic, and it is our responsibility as translators to enter into that dynamic with both an awareness of that dynamic itself and a willingness to combat it where we can. Obviously, these specific questions pertain to the act of translation, but they are ones that apply to poetry more generally, and ones that stem from a broader cultural discourse, which seems to be changing right now, in truly ugly and disparaging ways.



**JP:** Syntax and punctuation are two. Unless you are in the world of translation, you don't pay much attention to the fact that different languages, even when you translate from one Subject-Verb-Object language to another, will allow for different kinds of freedoms in both syntax and punctuation. I think another issue is translating gender and working with neo-pronouns. Given that English lost its grammatical gender centuries ago, it can be difficult, at times, to render some words, like professions, say, without adding extra words.



***WOE TO THE MAKERS OF LITERAL  
TRANSLATIONS, WHO BY RENDERING  
EVERY WORD WEAKEN THE  
MEANING! IT IS INDEED BY SO DOING THAT  
WE CAN SAY THE LETTER KILLS AND THE  
SPIRIT GIVES LIFE.***

— VOLTAIRE





## **AA: Like many disciplines, translation faces challenges with the rise of AI technology. How can translators and AI work hand in hand?**

**AF:** That's tricky. Online translation resources, like Google Translate or DeepL, can be pretty useful. At worst, they make for mediocre dictionaries. They have gotten better over the years, certainly. I broadly dislike AI as they are largely trained on plagiarism material and stealing the work of others. As of now though, AI does not understand poetry. You can't just copy and paste a poem into an online translator and expect it to produce anything resembling an actual translation: it doesn't understand line breaks, it doesn't understand metaphor, it doesn't understand much beyond definitions and syntax. I would personally steer clear of it. There's no place in the arts for AI. I can understand using an online translator as a quick dictionary though, but you should always cross reference it as well. In an ideal world there is no AI. Literary translation has existed for much longer than our current technology. Let's not forget that most of our religious texts are works of translations. Most of the texts that form the foundation of English Literature and literary criticism are works in translation. Walter Benjamin wrote in German. Michel Foucault wrote in French. Aristotle wrote in ancient Greek. Dante wrote in Italian. Think of some of the most influential writers you may have read in your academic career: Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Franz Kafka, Sappho, Pablo Neruda, Friedrich Nietzsche, Simone de Beauvoir, etc, etc, all coming to us English readers through translation. All of them predate AI. We don't need it.

**JJ:** My theory here—whether with translation or with writing in general—is that AI is a tool. Like any other tool, it is value-neutral. It can be used for good or ill. I imagine there are ways to write with AI that could be generative, in an artistic sense. I don't have a strong sense of what those might be. AI, and translation software more generally, can be helpful for the process of translation in the sense that it can hasten the initial process of bringing a word or phrase across the transom of language—much more quickly, for instance, than flipping through a manual dictionary or grammar book. However, in most cases, that software will provide merely what it understands to be the most accurate definition, not the multiplicity of possible meanings that often deliberately inhere within a poetic line. So there is the potential for lost meaning. In terms of poetry more broadly, AI simply hasn't been trained on the right poems, or kinds of poems, so it doesn't know how to write them, let alone how to reproduce one that will reflect that careful balance between fidelity and creativity or readability, or whatever metric readers want to attribute to a translated poem.



**JP:** My sister used to translate articles, not pieces written with much consideration for the art of expression, just texts trying to convey information.

Now, rather than do that, she copy-edits AI translations. It is cheaper and quicker for the client, that much is sure. But I find it rather boring. For me, part of the joy is the actual bringing the text over word by word, clause by clause, and trying to find creative solutions to the difficulties presented.



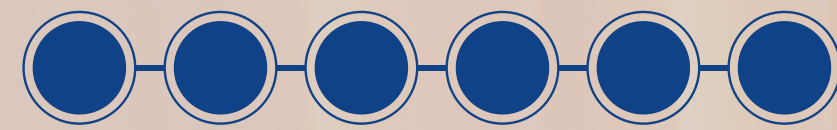
***TRANSLATION IS ENTIRELY MYSTERIOUS.  
INCREASINGLY I HAVE FELT THAT THE ART OF  
WRITING IS ITSELF TRANSLATING, OR MORE LIKE  
TRANSLATING THAN IT IS LIKE ANYTHING ELSE.  
WHAT IS THE OTHER TEXT, THE ORIGINAL? I HAVE  
NO ANSWER. I SUPPOSE IT IS THE SOURCE, THE  
DEEP SEA WHERE IDEAS SWIM, AND ONE  
CATCHES THEM IN NETS OF WORDS AND SWINGS  
THEM SHINING INTO THE BOAT... WHERE IN THIS  
METAPHOR THEY DIE AND GET CANNED AND  
EATEN IN SANDWICHES.***

– Ursula K. Le Guin



## AA: What's so important about the human presence in translation? How do you approach the dynamic between author, reader, and translator as an intermediary?

**AF:** I'm not sure I understand this question. There is no translation without human presence. There is no other intermediary. The translator is the intermediary, they are the bridge, the nexus between languages.



**JJ:** The important thing to keep in mind is that every translation is an artwork in its own right. This is at least one of the reasons we translate the same works over and over again. In a way, the new work represents a contribution to the translating poet's oeuvre and deepens our sense of how that poet comprehends the world or (re)presents it through language. There is a school of thought that would say a translator should essentially disappear in the translation, so that the voice encountered by the reader is the voice of the original text, not the voice of the poet-cum-translator. There is some truth to this. I think of Galway Kinnell's translations of the Medieval French poet François Villon. They sound exactly like Kinnell. One might argue that these versions veer too far in the direction of the artist and, therefore, do not accurately represent the source text. On the other hand, though, I really enjoy these translations, and I do think they contribute importantly to Kinnell's body of work. My understanding of and appreciation for Kinnell would be diminished in their absence. Ashbery's translations of Rimbaud sound a lot like Ashbery, though there is a Rimbaudian quality to Ashbery, so that might be a bad example. My point is that, while I think the translator wants to strike a careful balance, the human element is the artful element, and that's part of what we seek in translations. That said, I think all of this is differently true for works that have not appeared previously in the language of translation. For a work coming into English for the first time, this is that poet's introduction to the Anglophone world, and it would be wrong to misrepresent their work. On the extreme other end (and I think more canonical texts grant us more leeway in this regard) sometimes poets abandon the search for fidelity entirely, producing creative (mis)translations, which bear a relation to the original text but depart from it in playful or mischievous ways, ones that mark the product more as an original work than as a work of translation.



**JP:** A human dreamed up the texts I translate. They dreamed up images and situations. They played with language and wrestled words onto the page. They had something to say. Writers, I think, even those who say they only write for themselves, want readers. Translation, for me, is an act of care and of seeing another person through their creation.



## AA: What's one important takeaway about the work of translators that the public should know?

**AF:** It's important, necessary, and honestly a lot of fun. If you're a writer, it will change the way you write and think in ways you cannot imagine. Translation adds another dimension to your creative mind. Language is a medium. If you write, that's the medium you work in. If you translate as well, you are working on a different side of that medium, you have access to a whole different range of thinking because every language is different. Especially if you are translating work that has not been in English before. You are ushering in phrases and pieces of language, syntaxes, metaphors, and lines that have never been in English before. What's more exciting than that?

**JJ:** I would stress that while there are many schools of thought related to translation, and there is much to know in terms of reading and recreating an individual poem, that the process of translation is one of play. It is not unlike that act of writing a poem. To folks like me, who do not have a perfect grasp of the original language, I would also say that translation is still possible, and the best way to begin is just that: by beginning. It is crucial to have at least some grounding in a language beyond your native tongue, but your high school Spanish lessons, and maybe a quick brush-up on Duolingo, might well get you where you need to be in order to dig in. So don't be intimidated. Just go for it.



**JP:** Translation helps us see one another. Even if it is impossible to bring everything over into the new language, it helps us know and understand each other across our differences.

