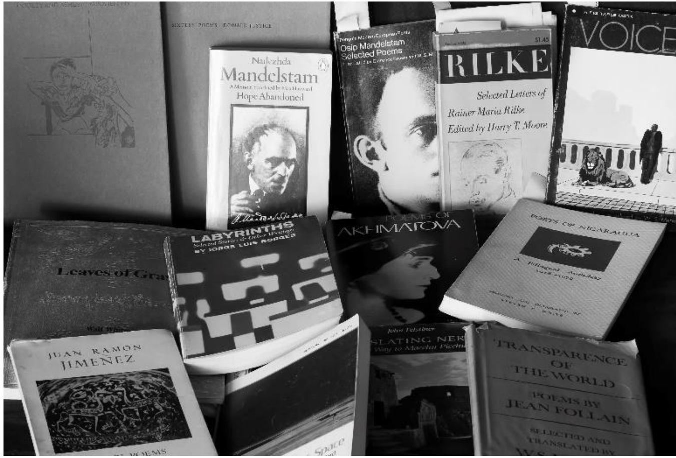
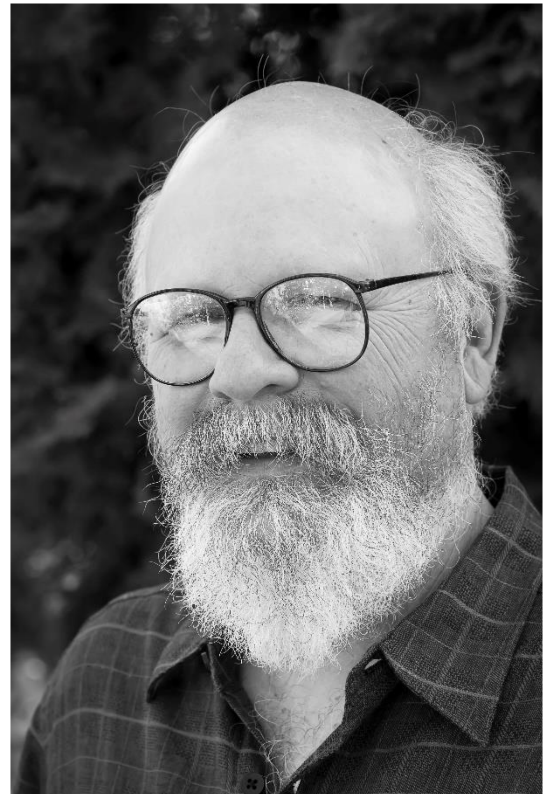


On Creativity
Interview with Greg Simon
The Grove Review
August 7, 2010

On a beautiful August day I drove up into the southwest hills of Portland, Oregon to visit with Greg Simon, perhaps best known for the seminal work that he and Steven F. White recreated in English, Federico García Lorca's Poet in New York. *What was to have initially been a limited exercise in translating a selection of this expansive work by himself soon became an all-encompassing project that gave birth to the standard Lorca translation of this book in the English language, and put Mr. Simon and Mr. White on the map.*

When I arrived at his home he met me in his front yard with a warm welcome. We sat down outside next to a beautiful garden brimming with late harvest vegetables, bees buzzing listlessly to and fro, at a table piled high with books charting Greg's progression as an artist along with food and wine.

TGR: Greg, thank you so much for your time today. I'd like to start with your story – your early life memories, educational experiences, and how you ultimately came to the life you now live.



GS: Well, every writer has two real beginnings, physical birth and the things that we all do before we are aware that we are or even want to be writers. And then I think at some point, if you have met the right people, if you have gotten yourself into a position where you can grow, you do. And it's all-consuming for awhile. At least it was for me.

I've taken some side tributaries. I chose to have a family. I chose not to live on the east coast in the center of the literary world. I deliberately made those decisions and never for a minute have regretted them, but they are certainly decisions that affected my literary life. And that pretty much began in Seattle. I was living in Oregon by the time I was five, and then after my sophomore year in high school my father decided to go after a

Ph.D. in education at Washington State University in Pullman, a million miles, it seemed, from Oregon.

Eventually my dad got a great job in Seattle, and I enrolled at the University of Washington. There I met my first writing peers, among them Laura Jensen, Tess Gallagher, and Jim Cervantes. My first writing teacher was David Wagoner, who was very patient and kind to me, and whose fatal act of generosity to me at that point in my life was to bring Mark Strand on as a visiting writer. Mark and I got along really well from almost the first moment we met. And the great thing that Mark did for me, other than help me expand my writing skills, was to allow me to look into his amazing and attractive life as a writer. It caught my imagination completely, that you could actually do this in America, in Washington State, even, in the late 20th century.

Obviously it helped if you could teach, that was the element that was behind all of it. And that, at times, was tiresome for Mark, I could tell. But the rewards far outweighed the labor.

Our class met in a basement room on campus, all of us sitting beneath old-fashioned light fixtures that came down from the ceiling. They were formed in concentric circles, each one getting bigger, and Mark would look up at those and say, *These are the anchors of the ships that are roaming the ocean above us*. You know, he started off each session with some completely outlandish notion. He said, *Go outside and look at the roof and write about that. There's something good there. I know there is.* I helped Mark find an apartment in Seattle, and he finally settled on a penthouse, so when he went out and looked at the roofs for subject matter, it was a lot more interesting than the view from my place.

I still have the first book of translation that I ever paid money for, which Mark probably suggested that I buy: *Forty Poems: Juan Ramón Jiménez*, translated by Robert Bly and first published in 1967. That purchase sealed my fate as a writer in many ways. Jiménez was of the generation that included my grandfather, who was not a writer, but who was the greatest influence on me in terms of my early life. George Ewert was a very peaceful, patient, gentle man, tremendous with his hands, and he loved growing things. He had to leave his native Minnesota because of his health, he had lung problems, and the west coast was recommended by his doctors. So after the war, my parents and my little sister and I climbed into a blue hump-backed Plymouth and drove from Minnesota to Roseburg, Oregon to be near my maternal grandparents. We moved into a tiny house not far from the Umpqua River.

This started a life-long association with living near rivers for me. My dad loved the water; he was a duck hunter and a boater. He loved being on the water, and wherever he landed he would search for a place that was near a river. I've also done that all my life. I don't feel comfortable, I probably couldn't even write if I was somewhere where there wasn't water or the ability to walk along it, observe it, be calmed by it, and be inspired.

TGR: You talked a little bit about teaching, and how you're the beneficiary of other people's generosity, and how for one reason or another that wasn't a path that you chose. Yet listening to you and slowly connecting the dots, you very much strike me as a teacher, and I'm wondering if it's just found its own channel?

GS: I think you're right. I think I've channeled those impulses to teach, which I inherited from my parents, into editing and translation. It is the impulse to meet face to face with people, to see what they're up to, and if possible improve their, well, not improve, but bring to coherence, is a phrase I would use. It's that kind of thing that's just amazing, and that's what you can do for your friends, once they've come to trust

you. Trust your impulses to improve, I keep using the word *improve* – it's not the right word – *facilitate* or *smooth*, *polish* maybe would be better. Smooth the rough edges a little bit. Once they know that's all you're going to do, then tremendous progress can be made.

I was amazed and pleased when I found out that Tess Gallagher and I employ the same physical object when we are ordering a book of poems: the living room floor. She and I make nice orderly piles, and then those piles get thrown about, and somehow, when it is over, you've got a manuscript. If you're lucky it flows and makes sense to the person you are working with, even if it is yourself. When I'm editing for someone else, I always request, *Keep an exact copy of what you gave me* because the chances are good that you won't get it back like that. It will be all messed up, and things will be marked on, and some things I won't understand or I won't think they fit, and those pages will be pushed to the back of the book and pinned together in their banishment. With me editing is a dynamic process. I've done it often with Paulann Petersen. She has a nice round table in her kitchen, and I edited one of her manuscripts by walking around that table in circles. We moved things about and pretty soon we were dizzy, but had a wheel that could be rearranged back into book form.

My mantra is, *Make sure it fits*. Make sure there are no rough edges. Make sure there is movement between the pieces. Flux. Nourishment. Both Tess and Paulann have wonderfully generous attitudes toward their potential readers. They both think these things through and try to imagine how a reader is going to approach their finished books and that's what they are working for. They want somebody to sit down and have the same experience reading that they had writing it and fitting it together. And to me, that's just a tremendous act of generosity. When I'm editing for the two of them, I have to remind myself that what they are after is transparency; they are after movement from clarity to clarity. In a way, that is the same thing you're looking for when you're translating, too. You want to be able to present to a reader who doesn't comprehend the original language the book as you are experiencing it. You are not creating it, but recreating it into a new language. So that's what I learned from

Tess and Paulann. You don't write books just for yourself. If you do, that's a close-minded, shortsighted way of doing it. You have to have someone else in mind, and that led me to collaboration. I hardly ever translate anymore just by myself. It really helps to have an immediate second or even third person to take a look at things before they get rigid.

Poetry manuscripts move around a lot, and it's that movement that produces the energy and it's the energy that produces a manuscript that's readable. You can make a dead translation of almost anything just by translating the words out of a dictionary. But people don't respond to that and they certainly won't know what the book is about if that's all you do for them. But if you work with that energy, and you have a sounding board, or if you have a punching bag, somebody that fights back and

says, *That isn't good. That wasn't there. You're crazy!* , that back and forth energy goes on and on for the duration of the time that you need to produce something alive. And if that energy isn't there, it will never be there. You can't infuse it into a piece of work. You have to find it and draw it out, and make it come to life. It can't be a top down process. It has to be from the ground up. And that's the great pleasure of it for me, there is this movement that you start, it's almost like a game, things don't make sense at first, then gradually the blank spaces disappear, the mysterious things open themselves up and reveal their true shapes. And when you're done, you have movement and something that comes to life in your hands.

There is no real evidence that Lorca ever thought his work on the New York cycle of poems was finished. Many of the poems in it were shifted between several different poetry manuscripts, and the book's simultaneous publication in Mexico City and New York, in slightly different editions, began what Daniel Eisenberg has called "the greatest controversy of contemporary Spanish letters…" But the final poem in the manuscript indicates to me that Lorca was thinking of it as complete, at least in metaphysical terms. In his son*, or dance song dedicated to the blacks of Cuba, one of the most passionate, joyous and evocative poems ever written in Spanish, Lorca calls his poetry* a coach of black water*, like the sleek Pullman that carried him by rail from New York City to Tampa, Florida. His black coach swept him along on a great surge of momentum created by the possessed state his New York cycle of poems put him in, out of the nightmare of New York, over the dark water of loneliness and despair, right onto the paradisiacal shores of the tropical island of Cuba, and into the rest of his life.*

The Gypsy Ballads *is a book against which other poets can measure their skills at historical narrative, embellishment, rhyme, rhythm and prosody.* Poet in New York*, to use a phrase from Lorca's exact contemporary, Osip Mandel'shtam, is a "missile for capturing the future." Its beauty is magnetic and inexhaustibly contemporaneous. It pulls us into an interior world infused with reality, which Octavio Paz has called "a promiscuous solitude… as large as the planet itself." It begs to be read and translated again and again because its lines are still the headlines of our*

newspapers, still the chapter headings of our books, still the destinations of our plans to travel. I prefer to think of it as a great clamorous train station, like Atocha or Grand Central, through which a modern poet or reader of poetry must pass on the way to the future or the past, to make or find poetry that is significant to our peers, to fill poetry with both the imperfections and accomplishments of human existence and culture, to let them beautifully shine through. Lorca linked New York and what it stood for with his ancient, Andalusian mind. The result is a living, breathing sieve: for images, for inner reality, for truth. [G. S. from "Geometry & Anguish: García Lorca 1929" in Fake-City Syndrome, Red Hen Press, 2002.*]*

TGR: I think about collaboration with another human being even more as an exponential opening up. How do you know you're there?

GS: There were points in time during the translation process when Steve and I were working on *Poet in New York* when I would have given everything I had to be able to call Lorca up and say, *Federico, you know, we're having a problem here in Oregon. Please help. We cannot figure this out for the life of us!* And it's a great sadness of my life, that I could have done that, Lorca could have easily lived long enough so that I could have called him on the telephone. He would have been very old, but he and I and Steve could have met and spoken and he could have ironed out some of the difficulties that still plague us to this day. The other sad thing is that, as far as I know, there is no recording of Lorca's voice. He never gave a reading that was recorded. He was involved in musical recordings, but only as a piano player. He was a wonderful singer, so we are told, but I have no idea how he sounded or how he sang. And he was a frequent performer. He made his living by performing, so he would give readings that were poems laced together with commentary. He would do lecture tours, where he would talk about poetry, and Granada. He could make whatever he was interested in come alive for large groups of people. And of course, he toured with the dramatic group that he started during the years before the Civil War in Spain. He was just so dynamic in person, it's just amazing that no one thought, *Let's get it down on tape.* So I guess I'm saying, in the absence of any physical connection, the relationship must be mystical.

TGR: Let's explore editing a bit more. The questions that are coming up for me are first of all, definition. What is editing? I heard you talk a little bit about a definition of successful editing, when things tend to fall into line a bit. When do you know your work is over, and what does a successful manuscript look like?

GS: I'd like to think that editing, the true definition of it is: time. You're giving your time and you're saying to the person that you are agreeing to edit that the time theoretically will be unending. It has to be an open-ended process. If you don't

approach it that way, it won't work, at least with me. I love deadlines; I think deadlines are great, but not for editing. I appreciate a deadline for a piece of work that that needs to be produced and published. I will work as fast as I humanly can because I don't have that unlimited amount of time either. But it may take longer than we think it's going to take. Or maybe, there's nothing wrong and I can just come back tomorrow and say, *Perfect. Send it off.* And that's happened a couple of times, but for the most part, I think you're saying to the other person, *I'm going to put my time in your hands and the hands of this work, and stick at it for as long as I think it takes for us to get to the place that I think the manuscript needs and wants to be.*

I'm very fortunate that I can often go to Paulann's readings in Portland, and I get instant feedback from the editing that I have been doing for her. I can hear it.

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When I'm hearing her poems read aloud, I'm often hearing the echoes of the previous versions and how they have been made more felicitous by the work that she and I have done on them. And the things click into place one after another and that's the kind of emotion and movement I'm talking about.

The heroine of The Voluptuary *is not a king's sybaritic mistress, installed in the summer palace at Versailles. Her assignations are with the stars, with color and the air. The richness she is sifting with her mind has everything to do with the amplitude of the earth and the generosity of her interior self. The companions who mostly comprise the human presence in the book are Whitmans all: Paulann Petersen* nee *Whitman; the poet's deceased parents, Grace and Paul Whitman, wearing their shrouds; and Walter Whitman Jr. himself, represented in his mythological sense as the Zeus of American poetry. The three specters are lovingly portrayed against a backdrop teeming with life, tracking events like illuminated planets in the intimate relationships of men, women, the moon and the stars. They are characters in a play for whom a master painter or weaver has created a billowing meticulous stage set that rivals life in its most minute and fanciful details, "…the treasure," as Pablo Neruda once described it, "that we find inside a kernel of wheat" or what Paulann identifies as the "body of this world [in] its coat of wild color," the "hoarded blue of unopened song…"*

The hoarded blue of unopened song – that's as good as any definition I've seen of the grail that poets seek, the electricity they crave, to animate their inner selves. It's a phrase that symbolizes the simultaneous coming together of time, location and color – what mind and self have to inhabit in order to act, to stroll down the broad, tree-lined avenues of prosody together. Prosody, that holy grail, "all parts together," as Walt Whitman referred to it, which he tempered with the "coming eve delicious," the poetic equation that produces a sunset, a just-opened jar of honey, the gravitational pull of a crescent moon on the ark of the world.

The Voluptuary *is vast, its pages define magnanimity. The contrasts within it are razor sharp – sun and moon, darkness and light, bumblebee and raven – all parts of life shot through with the silken strands of green, of grass in the fields and leaves on the trees, everything bathed in honeyed light. Paulann Petersen's poems read as if they are pieces from an "endless library," as she implies in*

her definition of poetry, something infinite and deep, like a well. She sees her words cast from a sounding-bowl across the sky, words as fine as "any line-up of suns a night sky could flaunt." Those worlds illuminate our path to the well. We lift our shining gourds and drink. [G. S. from "Afterword: The Coming Eve Delicious" in The Voluptuary *by Paulann Petersen, Lost Horse Press, 2010]*

TGR: How would you characterize your facility with language?

GS: I always think of language as electricity, sparks from another world, electrical energy that is involved and when you hit the switch there better be a light

bulb. You better have prepared. You're going to get fried otherwise. You need the receptacle, and that's what I mean about translation. You need to read all around the poet because those things will be required of you. You need to have glass around the filament. You can't just work with the flame, you'll burn out. It's impossible to put yourself exactly in the position of the other poet in the other language in the other country. You have to get there through the side door, use both sides of the brain, the hot side, the cool side. You have to protect yourself, make sure the flow is going in the right direction and that it isn't just throwing off sparks and burning down your house. If you practice applying energy to a translation project, you will get energy back that can be used by others to go inside the same open door.

Translation, at certain points, is extremely tedious. You have to fool the creative side of your mind, the side that wants to go outside and find a new poem on the roof across the alley. You have to chain yourself to your desk and keep pushing at the mystery of the other language until it yields its treasures. Lately I have been working on the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. He was fascinated by the myth of the Child King, Sebastião. The King had been brought up in such a religious fervor that he decided at the age of sixteen or so he was going to lead a crusade and conquer Morocco, bring the infidels into the Christian realm. And of course he got himself and his entire army slaughtered in the sand. Like the probable truth that the Greeks lost the Trojan War, truth that was replaced in literature by the glory of the *Iliad,* a myth grew up about the Child King that he didn't really die, and at some point in the future would return as a spirit force and lead Portugal back to glory. Pessoa fiddles with that myth; he found it extremely useful. He was able to put words into Sebastião's mouth as if he was living somewhere in the spirit world and planning his triumphant return. He has the King say, *The hollow part of me still lives in the sand of Morocco; what's not there is my eternity.* To me, that's what you are looking for when you are trying to make a piece of writing come alive. You're trying to create something that perhaps has lived inside a hollow part of yourself, but it isn't hollow. It's what's been filling you, or what's been trying to get out. There was so much pain for the Portuguese in the story of the death of the Child King, that by going back into it,

recreating it in his mind, that was the way Pessoa could deal with it, how he could relate it to his own life, his own writing. To me that is a kind of diction or prosody that you are lucky to catch in another language. I mean, for the most part Pessoa was speaking to himself and for himself, but through translation that wonderful insight into the psychology of an entire nation can be put once again on the printed page, in a language that I have a grip on.

No other poet I have ever read was so entranced with the texture of literature. "Words for me are palpable bodies, visible sirens, sensualities made flesh," Fernando Pessoa wrote. He saw the words

appear in the mirror, out of the mouths of his friends and his imaginary friends. Words are the opposite of dreams, and Pessoa could wield his words like emotions, softly and subtly, with manic, obsessive glee, or with the blunt force of a weapon.

The sounds Pessoa heard at all hours of the days and nights streamed through his consciousness like medieval funeral processions, or scenes out of Shakespeare, with the actors dressed in glorious silk array. The colorful silks of emotion! We greet Death in our finery. Death, in this sense, to be accompanied and embellished by processional, rhythmic noise that was traditional, repetitious, disturbing, emotional, and thus immortal, although whoever was being borne on the bier might soon be forgotten.

"Immortality," the poet declared, "is a creation of grammarians… Without syntax there is no lasting emotion." The words we read march across the pages, left to right, left to right, as if they were on the parade grounds as soldiers in their full dress uniforms. They are stable, dependable, and as immortal as an Ionic column. And the poet's temporal task, I must assume, in the face of those pale, emotionless, anonymous grammarians, came to demand of Pessoa the necessity of inventing diversions to combat immortality's tedium, while at the same time leaning heavily on all that grammar had to offer. "Words set free contain all possibilities for expression and thought." [G. S. from "The Art of X = 72: Fernando Pessoa" from The Salt River Review.]

TGR: I love listening to you speak about the well. Framed in my mind is the foreign text, then the subtext. Some of the mechanics of leaping from one language to another is technical, but it's only suggestive of locating to a certain degree. You talked a lot about insularity: grounding that final word choice that you come up with the interplay of fact and emotion, and that is what resonates with me.

(End of Session One.)

TGR: What bubbles up for you in terms of influence?

GS: In terms of being influenced, I wasn't, thankfully, until I got to the University of Washington. There I started to meet my peers, and that's where influences started to happen. The third or fourth teacher I had there was Mark Strand,

and his reading lists directed me. They were tailored to the kids he had in his classes. He would give out a massive one and then as you were progressing during the year he'd help you narrow it down in any direction you wanted to take. You would also learn what your peers were reading or not reading, what they enjoyed or did not enjoy. That, to me, was the beginning of becoming a writer. Before, I had just played at it, practiced it, really, with a certain attitude. Copied more than anything else. Not understanding the long term effect that any of it had. (Thank god I only had a very short e. e. cummings phase or I might still be writing in lower case!) When I started to meet my peers, several of them were older than I was and had been doing this longer

and had been starting to make more sense out of the resources that were available to them and that's what I also learned how to do – to read more than just what was on the pages, and to find out what was going on in the lives of the writers that we were interested in, what kinds of things were influencing them, what kinds of things they were showing to the people around them. I got very interested in the back pages – diaries, letters, criticism, gossip…

Rilke's *Selected Letters*, edited by Harry Moore, was among the books that we photographed today that have survived from my earliest days as a writer. His letters are poems. They're often just amazing. And I guess from what I've read about him that he did everything in longhand. He would start during the day and just work on whatever came up, if it happened to be a letter that just flowed out of a poem, or if it happened to be a poem that just flowed out of a letter, you often can't tell the difference. So if you weren't familiar with Rilke's letter writing and how amazing it was, you would be a deficient translator of his poetry because you need to know all of his modes, all the ways a writer like Rilke can work. Otherwise you are short-sighting yourself and you can't really put the full power of what's capable of your own brain into his work. It wouldn't be full. And your brain has to be full the way his brain was full. If that doesn't happen, then the translation won't be as full of life as it should be in order to go to another person. And so, if people ask me, What books have you read lately?, I say, *Well, I haven't read a whole lot of books lately, but I've read a lot of indexes!* I love indexes; an index gives me such a short-hand way to find out the path through the world of writers, to see if they are obsessed by or interested in the same things that I am, and if they are, there is suddenly a gold mine of things that I can put to work in my arsenal. Once I understood how to make use of all the things that were humming around *me* in a meaningful way, I then understood how I could become a writer.

Now I'm inseparable from my influences. They've twisted and turned around inside of me for all of these years and they keep popping out, just totally unexpected. That's the greatest thing, where you're just sitting and a line that you've assimilated, you've had in your head for a really long time, sitting still, half-forgotten, then it's there. You took the snapshot, it got embedded somehow, and you can call it up. You just have to get to the place where it's possible to do so. That's what I've been talking

about, needing time. Time to edit, translate, write. It's a summoning time, really. It's a summoning of your resources to bring them all to play on the project that you're working on. They're there; they may be hiding a little bit or have gotten rusty, even. But it's not so different from having a great toolbox that you carry around in the back of your car. You pull it out and you know you've got what you need to fix something that's gone haywire or isn't quite the way you want it, or even to just sit down and start the project from ground zero with the right tool. It's a good box of things to have.

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TGR: Can you expand a bit on the structure of your life now? When people think of writers or poets, artists in general, it's typical that it's fused with a life in academia or teaching workshops. You're not, to my knowledge, teaching workshops on editing or translation. I know you have a few things going on in your amalgam of existence. How does all that cohere?

GS: I think I decided at a certain point, in the middle of a dark and solitary Midwest winter, that I wanted to live as an adult in the Pacific Northwest. At the time I moved back for good, it seemed impossible to get a teaching job that would involve creative writing, so I made a deliberate choice not to pursue that. It wasn't difficult for me because although I enjoy being around young (or old) people who are striving to become writers, I feel I am much more effective person-to-person than I am in group situations where I'm supposed to be the head of the group. It also didn't make sense to me to attempt to deprive someone who did enjoy that kind of a job just because I needed a job. So I didn't do that and I was forced back on my own resources and in order to replace the stimulation of the academic life I was forced to develop more extensive friendships than I might have otherwise done. Friendships which would eventually involve editing and translating, and I knew that in advance, I knew I had to prove myself to myself and that's when I decided to tackle a major translation project, to show myself, first of all, that I could do it. The conscious thinking that I remember doing was to select the poems from *Poet in New York* that I really liked the most. I cherry-picked out of that book with no idea of being able to ever translate the whole thing. That was a self-challenge. That was just me saying to myself I want to do this, I want to figure out how it could be done, and I did. That set me up, that opened a lot of doors privately and publicly, and that decision has remained at the center of my literary life for as long as I can remember. I think it's a good thing. I don't regret it. Could it have led to academic success? Probably not, in my case, because I have never developed a strong enough background in the nuts and bolts of Spanish. You would never want to teach anyone to speak Spanish the way I do!

In order to translate, you cannot be competent without a tremendous grasp of English, if that's the language you're translating into. I know it took me a long time to feel comfortable with English. I still have my doubts. Not only of my own abilities, but about the capabilities of English to express a lot of the things that the rest of the world is interested in expressing. One of the things I've found out that most fascinates me is that other languages offer more opportunity for expression, at least on their surfaces. For example, you get tons and tons of syllables in Spanish. You get more than your money's worth with almost every word. You can do lots of floral things. You can do lots of embellishment. You can spin things out in long sentences that are gorgeous, you know, like the physical experience that you were going through

while you were writing that sentence itself. Other times, you need things that are blunter, and English certainly serves in that regard. Russian, very blunt language also, very short, monosyllabic type marching across the page. In Russian you can place the verb at the end of a sentence that is two pages long, and the native readers will march all the way to the end to get their verb; there's no deviation. It's: *I want that verb and I'm gonna get it!* I love having an arsenal like that, where if you're wanting to express something, pick a language, almost.

Osip Mandel'shtam's poetry, although seemingly more controlled, even formal, and possessing all the connectives and logic that he could fit into it, also brims with "complex emotional and intellectual content," as Bernard Meares points out, including "concealed quotations" from a myriad of foreign and Russian poets. His widow came to believe that "the whole value of poetry is in the quality of the poetic thought behind it, in the poet's view of the world, not in the externals of poetic form." In her view, there was nothing more important than "the endeavor to link the passing moment with the flow of historical time." It is a testament to the quality of Mandel'shtam's conversations with these other poets, the results of which he came to think of as "oratorios," that while the Russian Revolution brought radical change, collectivization, or abrupt cessation to all the forms of art in the country, Mandel'shtam's could neither be significantly altered nor completely silenced. Writing about another poem dear to Mandel'shtam's heart, the Iliad*, Rachel Bespaloff suggests that the Greek heroes "attain their highest lucidity at a point when justice had been utterly crushed and obliterated."*

Mandel'shtam was not any more forthcoming about the forms or quantitative aspects of poetic achievement than he was about his childhood, love life, or family. Instead he concentrated on modes of preparation for work and recognition of subject matter. He surrounded himself and armed himself with utility, not indifference, trying to match the warmth, and trying feverishly to extend his dominion to include the unity of European culture. In an essay on Russia's first intellectual rebel, Peter Chaadaev, he wrote: "…Unity cannot be created or invented or learned. Where there is no unity, at best there is 'progress,' but not history; the mechanical movement of a clock hand, but not the sacred linkage and succession of events." [G. S. from "Everyone Alive Is Incomparable: Osip Mandel'shtam".]

TGR: One question I have in my mind is just that of you finding work, work finding you, and that binding process of all the possibilities out there you go chase. Or do people pick up the phone and sent you a note? Part of my question is economic. Of all your engagements, is most of it paid? Is some of it paid? Do you do it just out of the love of the work? How do you devote your time?

GS: When I decided I would not pursue a teaching career, I think I separated myself into two different positions: one that I would write for the interior wealth it meant to me, and find other things to make a living out of that would be away from my writing. It hasn't always worked out that way, but for the most part it has. I felt

lucky, to a certain degree – in that I was available in a way that didn't require a lot of remuneration so that I could say to somebody even if I knew in advance they had no money for the project, if it was a project I was interested in, I was able to make time to do it. That time had been put into my bank already. When the possibility came up, after I had used my own stolen time away from my other jobs to do the initial Lorca translations, I was contacted by a literary agent. He was an interesting fellow, a friend of Mark Strand's, Thomas Colchie. At a period of time when publication rights to *Poet in New York* expired at Grove Press, Colchie swept in and bought the right to sell the book to the next potential publisher. But then he realized he was going to have to auction the book and he needed a version that wasn't the previously published version. He came after me because Strand told him that I had already done a bunch… So when the possibility came up that I could actually do the entire book, with the gracious assent of my wife, I quit my day job. I said to myself at that point, *This is something I have been waiting for*. I didn't know it, I didn't know it would come to me in this form, I had no clue! But it's the natural result of a lot of the threads that I'd been following in my literary life. It happened at all because of my relationship with Mark Strand, one of the most meaningful I've ever had with a writer who was both my peer and my mentor. It made absolutely no sense to say *No* at that point, to say *There may never be any real money in it*. (There wasn't, although accumulated royalties did eventually provide me with thirteen glorious days in Spain.) Steve White and I, and the editor who came to the project through the press, Christopher Maurer, got an initial advance. We burned through that rather quickly, and then I wondered, *How long is this going to take us?* (It eventually took us five years.) I just decided, *However long it's going to take is however long I'm going to do it.*

I sat at my desk in Northwest Portland and through the mail Steve and Christopher and I did the whole book from beginning to end so that it was in the bank. That is how I subsequently worked on every project I was interested in, whether it was collaboration or not. That was the mechanism I knew would work, if given the beneficence of my partner, if she said, *Yes*, if other things fell into place. Then I had to learn how to work around the hours that were required of me by my family. But I did.

I taught myself all this stuff, all of these mechanisms for stealing time and finding time and once I found that time to make the best use of it, not to fritter it away. I'm feeling pretty good at that, but I'm not really much of a time waster anymore. The difficulty I have is when I can't get to the subject matter, and that's what I refer to as writer's block – where you have a project, you know it's there, you know it's within grasp. It's not a problem of not getting time to work on it. The problem is I'm not getting it started in the correct manner. It has to start wide for me, and if I don't have that width, if I'm really narrowed down and too focused, then I feel blocked. Does that make sense? Some people would want it to go the other way around – that the ideal starting point would be once you reached the focus, but I can't

work that way. I need some initial uncertainty and chaos and mix-up-ness in order to get all the leads down, as many leads as I can get. It's like an explosion that you then narrow down to the flame. There's a great expression – I think it's in an essay from Robert Bly from his Sixties Press in which he is writing about translation, and he compares trying to translate a poet's work as *Dealing with explosions of light in a room that is already light.* To me, the initial project is like that. It's a little constellation that's come together and lit up this whole big area, and I want this whole big area at first. I want to be able to push my hands in as many directions as I can get them to go. Then I feel I get enough to carry the project to its logical or illogical end. I've worked that way with Lorca, with Gastón Baquero, with Rubén Darío, and most recently, as an editor, with Tess Gallagher's *New and Selected Poems.* Tess and I and her dear friend Alice Derry had this big wide wall of possibilities from her incredible body of published work. "All" we had to do was blow her books up, pull the lines back in, get them realigned the way Tess wanted, and then it would all be whole for her again. Forty-five thousand words!

Gastón Baquero, a Cuban poet in whom you came to live like a brain or an umbilical cord, equated the life of a poet with that of a circus acrobat who must cross the yawning darkness of a tent full of potential critics on one slippery strand of wire – something you might call prosody – holding just a pen for balance.

But it's a very wide *word, prosody. We think it means something like "all the weight of languages, theories, metrics, and forms of poetry." The art that you decided to master is built on this bedrock, prosody chiseled into recognizable form, not necessarily that of the lion on your tomb in the Cathedral of León, the one Federico and Pablo had no great taste for, but more like an omnipotent, marmoreal rose.*

So we began work on these translations with illusions of cool, calculated control – the granite face of Baudelaire cinched to the prow of our sailing ship, forever tacking into a brisk, salty wind. And oh, Rubén, we have borne a magnificent portion of dariana *prosody back into Nicaragua. Rubén to Rubén. But the psychic enormity of your work quickly reduced us to the imposters that we are. If only you could look into our hearts and see the primitive methods with which we counted your*

syllables – on our fingers, or with marbles dropped into teacups – each one a little tick-tock marking the progress of a day.

No poet ever hears the entire Pythagorean composition of another poet's inner music. At best translation must be conjecture, approximation; an accumulation of hints, wishes and desires; false starts and dead ends; a few lucky equivalencies, gathered together in horizontal rows that somehow add up to ghost poems, inhabiting at times the dark corridors of a bibliography of shadows. [G. S. & S. F. W. from "A Letter Al Alimón To Rubén Darío".]

TGR: I want to explore your writing and the act of translation. You talked about it in terms of movement and energy, and then coming to the narrowing down.

But I wonder if there is a way you can illuminate that process or that relationship?

GS: Everything I have published has undergone weeks, months, perhaps even years of scrutiny and careful revision, whether it is prose, poetry or translation. I feel I have learned that particular craft from my peers. Tess Gallagher, for example, is able to blow things up that other poets would think were finished, would be ecstatic to have achieved. I'll see an early version of one of her poems and the next version I see has moved some place unimaginable to me. That movement is poetry, its science, its music, its mystery.

I gave a talk not long ago interweaving four of my own versions of poems by Fernando Pessoa with prose context of my own. I began by reading the same line in four different versions. Obviously, because I was in my public mode, the last version of the line, which was my own, well, I was setting them up to prefer that one. A little test, and I'm sure everyone passed. Here they are:

For me, under the sunset, the great river trembles even if I don't see it run.
I know a great river surges, even if I never see it beneath the sunset.
I know a great river surges beneath the sunset, even if I never see it.
I know, beneath the sunset, a great river surges, even if I never see it.

I saw four phrases in that sentence, and getting their proper order, the sum of which would constitute Pessoa's *one-line* homage to the amazing river that runs through Lisbon, the Tejo, was my task as a translator. There is nothing conditional about the river, or about the poet's awareness of it. The sentence begins with that awareness in all four versions, but for me the river's awesome power had to be the central hinge. But the sun is also involved, and always the presence in humans who stand helplessly before a powerful element of nature with a little doubt, or humility, and a sigh at the end, a recognition of the existence of mortality, not only in the human, but perhaps also in the river and the beloved earth it surges through. Pessoa's

mastery in one sentence! To begin with himself, and end with a different version of himself, and with the sun and the Tejo on center stage, as it is and should be.

The River

I grow calmer & calmer.
I think I'm going to die –

young, tender tiredness to
quench desire I once desired.

My spirit astonishes me –
acquiescent to this feeling.

Suddenly, in the green grove,
a river shines beyond it.

Circling me now, this is real –
Tejo, sunlight, almond trees.

Fernando Pessoa
[Version by G. S.
from The Salt River Review]

GS: (Continued from above…) I know I am done with a line when it reads to me as if it's something I could have written, or I mean, when it speaks back to me as if it's something I can stand up and say naturally. It's all rhythm at that point. Did we talk about Pablo Neruda last time? I have translated many of his poems, but published only a few. Many of his lines, in his later poems, are one word, even one letter. I can't read that way. The natural rhythms that come out of me as a writer are wider; my attention span is longer. Probably my ideal line is seven syllables. That's the natural voice that is Greg Simon's voice. Things come to me in sixes, sevens and eights, hardly ever in threes, although I can divide sevens into threes and fours. I'm not a long line writer, and I'm not a short line writer. So I translate Neruda into sevens, if the poem I'm working on is uneven, because that's how I'm hearing him. It's considered to be incorrect by many people. They're thinking, *How can you publish a translation of Neruda that doesn't look like his original?* Well, my question to them would be, *How can I get up and read something I can't read as music?* I don't translate poems just so that they will appear on the page. I want to read them, too. I want people to hear

them out loud, or even just to say them out loud. That is when they often change and grow.

To me, that involves rhythm. Poetry is rhythm. There is a music to it that cannot be ignored. Neruda had a different sort of music, and some of it isn't translatable by me. I can't go back and spend a day the same way that Neruda spent a day writing one of his poems. It's just never going to happen. I'd love to be able to do it. If he was still alive, possibly we could. Possibly we could set it up so that he could tell me exactly what it was he was doing, what he was thinking, what he was hearing, that if he could put the music into it for me, then perhaps I could translate it exactly according to his music. I'm not sure that would mean I could still stand up and read it effectively in public.

I take reading very seriously, and it has to feel natural. It has to come out of this interior part of me, my breath, and to me that has everything to do with rhythm and nothing to do with forcing myself into being something that I'm not. So that's just a convoluted way of saying that, yes, probably, I do count syllables at times to make sure that I haven't left anything out; so that if I get a poem I'm translating that has a seventeen syllable line, I'm going to divide it into maybe two or three, but I'm going to get those seventeen syllables. I'm not going to leave anything out. But I have to change it in an internal way in order to make it come alive for me in English, and it's exactly the same when I'm writing something that's to be read. I want to hear it. I want to hear it in my rhythm, English, my rhythm set up according to my understanding of English and the things that it can do poetically. And I'm happy to say that my relationship with poetry in English, as opposed to the things the language must do in its day to day existence, is still changing. At least I think it is.

So the Neruda poem (I'm thinking specifically of his wonderful "Ode to Walt Whitman") looks the way it looks on the page, but that isn't how it's going to look to you when I've translated it. Of course I could do it that way, but that wouldn't be my translation then. That would be Neruda's translation of Neruda through me. That's a legitimate thing! If you want to criticize me for that, you're right. I accept that criticism. Perhaps I'm a bad translator because I'm not faithful to the page layout. It only comes up with some poets, by the way. It doesn't come up with poets who write sonnets. I mean, with them, you're in, man. A sonnet is a great thing because the rhythmic energy of it is all coiled up and ready to explode, and you can limit the number of stresses and things, so you're playing with dynamite there. But Neruda, there's not so much tension in those poems on the page as I first see them, but they are dynamite out loud. They're just amazing poems. You make your choice: Do I want it to be amazing in the way I understand English, or do I want to try and mimic the Spanish, in which case I think it will be bad English. It's deadly on the page to mimic because it shows weakness. It shows that you've just accepted the Spanish on the terms of the Spanish, and not carried it over as you must into English. It has to carry

over. It is my obligation as a translator to release all the dynamics that are in poetry, not just the superficial one of saying, *This was Spanish and now it's English.* Poetry is more than that.

If – and people have – at certain points – told me there isn't that much difference between original poems that I write and translations that I publish, I consider that to be a compliment. It means that I have managed to assimilate at least the translations I've published. And I have to admit that I've done many more translations than I've ever published because many of them just don't make it into English. But I have done the best I can to assimilate them into my own understanding of poetry and rhythmic language and how it is expressed from one person to another, so, yes, it would be a good thing if you couldn't tell the difference, if I actually

published something and it sounded like a translation. It's just the way I write. I can't separate the two any longer, and I often don't know anymore – if a line comes charging out at me – where I first saw it, whether it was something that was original writing by somebody or whether it was something I translated and therefore
assimilated after awhile. I often can pretty much recognize those lines and go backwards in time and figure it out, but that to me is also a good thing. It is something I learned from Donald Justice – poetic things are poetic things, and once you recognize them as such, that's all you have to do. That's your responsibility, but once you've done it, you've done it. You have to learn when to recognize when you haven't done it, and how to stop and leave it alone when you have.

I've taken so much poetry inside me – it's pretty abundant in there, like a big old unruly jungle. Once I get back in through the gate, I'm pretty happy. Drinking from the well again with the other untamed creatures. There's a bunch of stuff roaming around in there still waiting to be seized upon. To me that's encouraging.

TGR: How do you know when you're finished? When one configuration feels better than another to you?

GS: When it's good, it's good. It knocks you down. It makes you feel like that's what you're here on earth for. You're just here to hear those things and see those connections, and they come to life. You're working on a poem and all of a sudden you realize that there are things from the past that are in this poem. I think you can say that it's the directness you want. You want to feel that it came on the direct line.

Lorca was amazing in this regard. He invented so many new poetic forms that can be picked up and used. He went into the past of the Spanish language and culture and found these things that had been abandoned and left by the wayside and brought them back to life and put his own words into them. Lorca's college roommate, Salvador Dalí, was ruthless in his criticism of this kind of stuff. In public he said, *We don't need to be going backwards; we need to be always rushing into the future*. (In private though,

in his painting studio, Dalí suffused nearly everything he created with the most wonderful bits of pictorial homage to the great masters of the past.) Dalí's futurism was the impulse behind much of what Lorca wrote in *Poet in New York*. He proved he could do it. But after *Poet in New York* he started going back to more traditional forms. He was hearing songs for his plays as he was writing them, and they were always accompanied in his mind by music. There was a production recently of one of Lorca's plays at Lewis & Clark College. I thought the stage was absolutely brilliant! The musicians stood or sat behind a door that had a parchment paper window in it, backlit, so that you could see them playing their instruments. They weren't intrusive, and the music came pouring out over the transom. There was light, there was movement, it was just a wonderful evocation of what Lorca must have been hearing

and how he heard the bands in his head. And they were playing this music to accompany these traditional, old-fashioned plays that Lorca was writing about the deeply Spanish themes of murder and rape and incest – all uplifting material! But there was always music playing. So to me, you have to do that. You have to hear the music, too, and make a place for it, and get wide enough so that all of that comes flowing into you. There are forms that will come. There are forms Lorca invented – a panorama. You wouldn't think that was a poetic form, but it is. Landscape, too. *Well*, he must have said to himself, *I'm going to write a landscape. And a nocturne; I'm going to write a nocturne. And an intermezzo; I'm going to write an intermezzo*. And after a while it starts to pile up and you realize he had these ideas, and when it seems like a nocturne to you, it can go to its place in line and then once you have all of them in line, they start to demand other things. They start to say, *Well, Greg, I'm related. I'm related to this line and you haven't related me yet*. You know it's there, though, you just know it after a while. That's really what a translator does – do the concordance of the book and it's a wonderful word. The words are all related. They were all related when Neruda or Lorca were forming them in their minds so it's your job to make sure the relationships are there and visible and that's when you are done. When you know the poems are talking to each other again in the language you're trying to get them into, and when they make sense in a linear fashion, then you're done.

But no translation should every be thought of as good for more than ten years or so because languages are changing so amazingly and cultures are changing and everyone deserves to have their own translations of terrific work. At the same time, my two partners and I have left behind a really great map of *Poet in New York*. We have shown future translators where to go to find the concordances I was talking about, where words speak to each other, themes speak to each other. For goodness sakes, Christopher Maurer has related poems to the artifacts he has seen in the Lorca collection in Madrid, and that's priceless. A future translator won't have to go and do all the research that we've already done for them. They'll be able to follow these tracks. Hopefully the tracking of the music, the relationships between the words will

inspire them. I want someone to be inspired to do another version of *Poet in New York*. That's what Lorca would have wanted, too. That's why you write. You want your work to inspire the next person who comes along and for them not to be dependent on something else that someone else has done, but to go stick their hands in the fire themselves.

Other translations, other forms of heat, other forms of poetic forms themselves will be required for different audiences, and I anticipate that and think it's a good thing. I wish I could live to see another great translation of it. That would really please me, just to be amazed again by the book. *Poet in New York* is so unbelievably positioned between all the points of interest in poetry that engage me. I see it as the bellwether or the lighthouse. I want to expose its energy to everything

that's important to me. That energy seems to me the ideal one. I didn't know it, but that was what I was always looking for as a writer. I wanted that to happen to me, and that's the feeling I was trying to get across in the translation, that this meant everything to me. This was how I understood poetry came into existence, the way Lorca made it come into existence against the odds of it happening at all, at that particular time, in that particular place.

Any man, woman, or child introduced to García Lorca in Madrid or Granada in 1921, while he was composing Poem of the Deep Song*, would have found him to be a well-dressed, slender young man with olive skin, an unruly shock of jet-black hair, and dark, expressive eyes. His personality was a combination of playfulness and intensity, shot through with relentless curiosity about everything. He loved spontaneity and gatherings of friends and family. He was surprisingly religious in a spiritual rather than a doctrinal way; he enjoyed High Mass as a spectacle, especially the music. He was both fearful of and fascinated by physical violence and the concept of eternal damnation, but in his capable hands the piano became an instrument of natural and serious joy.*

What might not have been apparent in 1921 was that Lorca was in the shallows of what was to be an extraordinarily sustained implosion of poetic activity that would last for more than a decade. He had just simultaneously begun another book of poems that would be written in long sequences, and eventually published as Suites *(Ariel, Barcelona, 1983). A few of these lyrics were so completely hermetic they might have collapsed in on themselves like windless sails if not for the fact that the poet's persona was wide enough to absorb and reflect in silver moonlight the geographical and mythical landscape of Andalusia in its entirety.*

It certainly is a rare gift for a poet to have a constant stream of visual, historical, mythical, and sensual subject matter passing by the window. In an essay he wrote to introduce the concept of a festival in Granada celebrating cante jondo*, Lorca described what he perceived to be the emotional schematic of a typical evening in old Granada: "the blue remoteness of the vega, the Sierra greeting the tremulous Mediterranean, the enormous barbs of the clouds, sunk into the distance, the admirable rubato of the city…" This is an ancient list. Its elements existed before language was invented, and it is one of the ambient keys with which Lorca unlocked the unwritten mystery of the music he would*

follow unerringly to find his own duende. *[G. S. from "The Black Torso of the Pharaoh", an introduction to Ralph Angel's translation of* Poem of the Deep Song, *by Federico García Lorca, Sarabande Books, 2006.]*