

Poet Kate Armstrong in Liege, 2009

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A Dundee resident and a passionate drystone waller, to name but two of her many attributes, Kate Armstrong arrived in our brand new and oh how impressive railway station on a bright Tuesday afternoon. It was indeed one of those late October week that still dream of summer. She had been invited over to contribute to a course on Scottish literature in BAC3 (Wednesday 21 October, 10-12) and to give a translation workshop on three of her poems with MA2 students (same day, 5 to 7).

As an introduction to her morning reading she mentioned the commitment of most Scottish writers to the specificity of their language(s) and the political and economic changes that have shaped public life in Scotland over the last decades. She also referred to her own commitments, notably to freedom of speech with her participation, as a poet, in an Amnesty International action about China.

For each of the half dozen poems she read ('Textile Toun' on road works in a town that used to be a centre of textile industry, one on the sheer serendipity of apples on a back road, one of stane dijk – or stone wall in Scots, and the three poems she had sent for the translation workshop, see below) she first provided some personal context on the circumstances in which they were written before inviting a discussion of the form, on how and why they worked as poems (or did not – but they really do).

She concluded the session with a polyphonic experiment, using a short rhyming poem written in Dutch on the sea, and translated into Scots, English and French. The idea was to suggest a community of people and languages around the North Sea through some sort of choral effect (we'd have to add Danish, and Norwegian, and Icelandic, I suppose). Carolina pointed to the need for a much stronger rhythm to help with our shaky coordination. Nobody was recording. Thanks for small blessings.

The translation workshop prompted even more participation among students, most of whom had carefully worked on their French versions of three rather different poems : haikus inspired by a secluded fishing village on the North-East coast, a rather melancholy poem on approaching the winter solstice, and a jaunty one, triggered by the sight of a hare in field, on the abundance of life. Students appreciated the open nature of the discussion and the consideration given by the author to each single suggestion. It was their first class on translating poems, and they got the message that with poems probably more than with any other kind of text you never have a final or single translation. Yet at some point you have to settle and leave out other possibilities, as indeed the poet does too.



Some brightness

The mist's heavy, lit by a pale dawn,
lit more and more, and the soft droplets shifting,
lifting
drifting
away, and there's sky of a sort: not sunny. Some brightness.
And all the candles I've lit for friends this year
line up in my mind, as the solstice comes again;
the hopes heavy; they all burned down and were spent
and replaced and re-lit. But a good year,
some brightness.

Comme une éclaircie

Brume pesante, éclairé d'aube pâle,
plus claire encore, et des gouttelettes doucement s'écartent,
se soulèvent
se dis-
sipent, et voilà comme du ciel : pas de soleil. Comme une éclaircie.
Et toutes les bougies allumées pour des amis cette année
s'alignent dans ma tête alors que revient le solstice ;
espérances pesantes ; elles ont toutes brûlé, consumées,
et remplacées, et rallumées. Mais une bonne année,
comme une éclaircie.

