Oksana Maksymchuk: You grew up in a family of writers, and some of your oldest friends are fellow poets. Could you tell us more about how this context shaped your interest in literature? Did you start studying and making poetry at the same time, or did one activity precede another? And how do you balance these two modes of engagement with literature now?

Rachel Galvin: I started writing poems at a very young age, so young it seems absurd to say it. But I started keeping a journal at age five and shortly thereafter began writing poems. It's true that poetry was in the air at home. My mother gave me her copies of collections by her favorite writers. Those were some of the first poets I spent extensive time with—e. e. cummings, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Pablo Neruda. I loved cummings's wordplay and humor, his iconoclastic capitalization and punctuation; I was moved by Whitman's rhythmic oratory and strange intimacy with the reader; and enthralled by Neruda's imagery and intense lyricism. I learned poems by all three of them by heart. Dickinson, I'll admit, I didn't appreciate until much later, when she then overtook the others. But as a child reader I found her poems tedious and old-fashioned. *The Complete Poems of e. e. cummings* is the first sizeable item I ever saved up my own money to buy—it cost $50, which struck me as exorbitant—but I wanted it very much, so I saved little by little from my part-time jobs and finally purchased it at the Park Avenue Book Store (one of Rochester, New York's, great independent bookstores, run by a brilliant, kind bookseller), which sadly closed a few years ago. I was intensely focused on writing and always wrote both poetry and short fiction (as a teenager, I spent one summer writing a complete young adult novel, which was then consigned to languishing in a box, likely for the best). After I started graduate school, poetry felt more natural to continue with alongside critical writing, which absorbed much of my energy for prose. I've returned to prose in recent years, and am now revising a novel.

But to return to your question, I'm profoundly grateful to my mother

for introducing me to poetry and making it an ordinary part of our home life. (She also spoke to me in Spanish and regularly played music in Spanish and French, so those languages and their rhythms and sonic patterns were in my head from infancy too. That had a lasting effect on me.) My mother had written poetry in her teen years and though she turned to prose afterward, she always remained connected to poetry. In fact, since I attended the same public high school she did—this is something I was embarrassed about as a high schooler and now find a bit wild—we both served as poetry editors of the literary magazine, *Galaxy*, which still exists.

In any event, my relationship with reading and writing poetry runs long and deep, and certainly precedes my work as a literary scholar. I have always thought of myself first and foremost as a writer, whether I'm writing poetry or essays or criticism.

OM: You've published three collections of poems; and you're currently at work on a new collection. Could you tell us about what you're working on now, and offer us a glimpse into your process? Do you start with a question, or a concept, or a theme? With a dialogical partner, a lineage, or a literary text you're in conversation with? What are some of the challenges that you encounter? How do you determine when the work is done or complete?

RG: Right now I'm working on a book titled *Super Market*. The poem included in this issue of *SRPR* is drawn from that manuscript. A year or so ago, I had a waking dream in which a series of scenes inside a supermarket were dynamically overlaid and I snapped awake from the trance with the urgent feeling that I absolutely must write a poem about supermarkets. This perhaps didn't entirely come from nowhere; I grew up in Rochester, New York, home to the grocery giant Wegmans, founded there more than a hundred years ago. It dominates Rochester and looms large in public life and in the public imaginary. There is quite a lot in the manuscript about Wegmans, but the poems in the book range further afield than that as I continue writing and thinking about the experience of food and food politics, from food production and food distribution to the social spaces of supermarkets and grocery stores and how they are a locus for violence and racism and misogyny. As you know, supermarkets

were also an important part of the US's anti-communist campaigns during the Cold War. The more I learn about the history of food production and consumption as it is channeled through supermarkets around the world, the more fascinated I become. But this interest arose from a very visceral place, from a childhood connection to a particular store, as well as from later experiences during the pandemic—and as an inhabitant of this country, witnessing mass shootings in supermarkets across the country.

The new poetry collection is quite different from the previous one, *Uterotopia,* which was published in 2023. That book is very intimate in many ways: there are sequences of darkly humorous poems about the experience of trying and failing to have a child and the many difficulties and ambivalences that surround having children at all, poems about sexism and violence against female-presenting people, poems about death (I lost my grandparents just before starting to write the book). That all sounds quite heavy, but I hope that there's humor and luminosity threading through it as well. The book also features ekphrastic poems that are in conversation with the paintings of the extraordinary artist Vera Iliatova, who lives in New York. Vera and I have known each other for a long time and at a certain point I began writing in response to / alongside her paintings, which absolutely light up my imagination. She's incredible. I wish I could write poems as vivid as her paintings. I can't tell you how thrilled I was when she agreed to allow one of her paintings, *Person You Choose,* to appear on the cover (I wrote a corresponding poem called "Empty Rooms," which is included in the book). There's also a quasi-sonnet called "Fine Arts," which is written after W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," that is about Vera's powerful painting and mentions her by name.

About the writing process … I write very intuitively. One of the greatest pleasures of writing poems, for me, is not knowing what I'm doing or where I'm going. I'm not very calculating about it at all—quite the opposite. The feeling of exploring, of letting the language carry me somewhere, is part of the reason I write at all. That said, anything might set the writing in motion—a dream, a comment I overhear on the street, a painting, a news story, a poem, a funny story someone tells, a surprising juxtaposition. And there

are certain writers I turn to again and again to re-enter language, its bewitchment, its elasticity and its rhythms, the way it is a human form of being alive and witnessing life.

OM: In addition to being a poet and a literary scholar, you are also an accomplished, award-winning translator of difficult, experimental works from Spanish and French. How do you choose your translation projects? Do you have a method that you prefer? And are there any approaches to translation that you find troubling or problematic?

RG: I've been translating for over twenty-five years now—primarily, but not exclusively, poetry. Translation projects have come along different channels. I began translating the French poet Raymond Queneau long before I went to graduate school. I lived with that challenging translation of *Hitting the Streets* (*Courir les rues*) for a good while before publishing it, trying to get it just right. Queneau is probably best known for his novels in the English-speaking world, like *Zazie in the Metro*, but he published a number of significant poetry collections as well. He was a member of the major experimental groups of his time, from the Surrealists to the Pataphysicians to the OuLiPo, a group he cofounded in 1960. ("Oulipo" is an acronym for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle,* which can be translated as the Workshop or Sewing Circle for Potential Literature.) The group, which is still thriving today, unites writers and mathematicians looking to use constraints to develop new literary forms they hope will prove durable. I loved Queneau's writing, and *Hitting the Streets* in particular, which is a love song to the city of Paris, a place I had lived for a while. His poems are populated by taxi drivers, street sweepers, boisterous children, grumpy zoo animals, and more. The book is wickedly funny, but it is also a bittersweet meditation on history and how "the river of forgetfulness carries away the city." (In addition to several poems about pigeons, it describes the foul breath of the métro, terrible traffic, public urinals, the Vietnam War, and the history of French collaborationism, among other things.) Almost all the poems are rhymed, though they're metrically quite free. They frequently feature French as it is actually spoken, or what Queneau called *le néo-français,* distinct from conventional written French. During the translation process, I was lucky to meet and

consult with some contemporary French writers, including members of the OuLiPo who knew Queneau personally, and that was a help and an encouragement.

The translation I did of Argentine avant-garde poet Oliverio Girondo, which is a cotranslation with Harris Feinsod, grew out of a desire to have a teachable, bilingual edition of Girondo's brilliant early work—which presents another poetics of urban flânerie, full of cityscapes, cafés, ports, and international travel. Girondo's poetry is often hilarious, well-spiced with social commentary, and his poems quickly earned an important place in the Latin American vanguard both topically and formally. Girondo and his close friend and sometime-rival Jorge Luis Borges were both part of the famous Florida group of avant-garde writers in Buenos Aires. I thought it was surprising his early work hadn't been translated yet, as did Harris. We translated Girondo's first two collections, *Twenty Poems to Be Read on the Streetcar* (the title is a bit of a joke, as the book was first published in an oversized edition that would be unwieldy to read on a crowded streetcar) and *Decalcomania* (whose title imagines a process in which the poet's impressions are transferred onto the poem, like a decal or luggage sticker is pressed onto a page or a suitcase). Harris and I happened to coincide in this interest at the right moment and it was a wonderful experience of serendipity and synergy, translating together over a period of years. I know you've done extensive cotranslation, yourself, and you understand the collaboration and negotiation it requires. Harris and I had a lot of fun with it. And thanks to his legwork, we were able to include Girondo's striking and humorous original watercolors in the volume, which Open Letter Books did a beautiful job publishing.

While wrapping up that project, I started translating the contemporary Mexican poet Alejandro Albarrán Polanco after we were paired together for the Lit & Luz Festival in 2016. The festival matches Mexico City-based and Chicago-based writers and artists in collaborative performances. It was a stroke of excellent luck that the festival organizers matched us up. In addition to having written four poetry collections, Alejandro is a musician and conceptual artist who makes installations and artist's books. We collaborated on two performances in Chicago and made a recording of our

collaborative project "Headlines," with music from Jim Becker, which braids together sections from each of our poems. Then, in 2017, we all performed together in Mexico City at Centro Cultural Horizontal and Museo Tamayo. Working with Alejandro is the first time I've had extended collaborations over several years with someone whose poetry I'm translating. We developed a good rapport. We are both deeply interested in poetry that engages with news, and how poetry often serves as a first draft of history, something I wrote about especially in my collection *Elevated Threat Level* (Green Lantern Press, 2018) as well as in my criticism (*News of War: Civilian Poetry 1936–1945*, Oxford University Press, 2018). But also I think we share an enjoyment of wordplay—which does, of course, make translating Alejandro's poetry all the more challenging! I'm grateful to be able to consult with him when something confuses or stumps me, and am appreciative of his openness to the poem finding a new self in English. In 2019, we published a chapbook of Alejandro's poems with Ugly Duckling Presse, in their wonderful Señal series that publishes contemporary Latin American poetry in bilingual editions. I'm now putting the final touches on a full-length manuscript, *Some People Are Not Horses*. The book plays with the structure of logical syllogisms and hearkens to the language play of the Latin American avant-garde (and even, sometimes, Gertrude Stein), while always remaining densely lyrical and moving, as the poems think about fear, desire, love, death, and what makes us human. It's a dazzling book.

OM: You are a cofounder of an international translation collective, Outranspo. You also direct the Translation Studies program at the University of Chicago. Could you tell us a little more about your work in this domain and the conceptual commitments that underlie your interest in collectives, communities, laboratories, and so on?

RG: Well, as I mentioned, it can be terrific fun to collaborate. Collaboration often leads to surprising, delightful outcomes—whether it's a line or phrase suddenly conjured out of the air, or a project that grows in unexpected ways. I've found this to be the case when collaborating with one person or when working together with the other members of the creative translation collective you mentioned, the Outranspo. I cofounded the group with two friends and kindred

spirits in translation, Camille Bloomfield and Pablo Martín Ruiz, in 2012, and it really took off in 2014. Our name is a trilingual acronym of "Workshop for Potential Translation." (We are an OuXpo, or a spinoff of the French group the OuLiPo, where the *X* stands for many different art forms.) Our idea is to create new works through self-imposed translation constraints. We currently number around fifteen, with members residing in Europe, Latin America, and North America, and working in a range of languages. We've created a series of projects that include publications and performances and we have a website you can check out (outranspo.com). So, for example, we created a collaborative multilingual homophonic translation that was set to music by Chilean composer Fernando Munizaga and performed at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. We published a coauthored, trilingual, creative translation manifesto; and cowrote a book that taxonomizes creative translation constraints, which should be published in France in 2025.

For one of my favorite Outranspo projects, we were commissioned to write a set of transcreations for the 33rd Biennial in São Paulo, Brazil, to accompany the work of nine visual artists as part of the "O pássaro lento/Slow Bird" pavilion curated by Claudia Fontes. Our goal was to compose transcreations that would be analogues of the artwork on display (installations, sculptures, videos, paintings, sound pieces, etc.) and suggest ways to understand that work. The transcreations were mounted like wall labels, but they didn't explicate the works of art; rather, they stood in dialogue with them. I was matched up with video and sculptural work by artists from Bolivia, Argentina, and Lithuania. It was tremendously interesting and invigorating to write those transcreations.

To return to your original question—for me, translating has meant entering into community. The friendships and alliances and solidarities that have formed for me through translation (with people working across different languages) have been crucial and have taken me to unexpected places both literally and figuratively. That's something that I feel is important to nurture. I wrote in a piece recently published in *MLN* called "What Is Activist Translation?" that collaboration itself can be a form of activism, since contrary to the cult of (single) authorship, literary translations are almost always the product of many people's work—as you well know!

OM: I love to hear about the poets' routines: what compels or inspires them to create, under what circumstances, and where. Do you have any favorite times and places to work? Any favorite strategies for dealing with a dry spell? Do you sense that writing a novel might involve a significant shift in your approach to language—and to time? If so, are these changes irreversible, or a stage in the process that will continue to involve oscillations between the different forms of thinking and writing: scholarly, translation, poetry, and fiction?

RG: I'm envious when I hear about writers who maintain strict routines. It is something I can't fathom for my own life, and in fact it seems less and less possible as time goes on. Finding quiet, focused time is a challenge. I often write in between things, in odd moments, stolen minutes. I tend to write more during breaks in the academic year—over the winter and summer breaks—because I have more time then. But overall, it involves some acrobatics to balance out creative writing, translating, and scholarly writing. I often ricochet from one thing to another. When one piece of writing won't budge, I'll switch gears to a different project—which leaves me feeling like I'm always sneaking away from one thing to dally with another. That sneakiness is perhaps helpful … and it's definitely the case that my research inspires my writing and vice versa. The problems I'm trying to think through or feel through in one mode often get thought through in another. So, these three cross-pollinate and nourish each other.

For me, attempting to write a long piece of fiction like a novel is like training to run a marathon (not something I have ever literally done, mind you, but I'll borrow the metaphor!), in that it requires an almost ritualistic daily practice and sustained presence so as to inhabit the world you're making. It's utterly different from writing poems or translating poems. Unlike writing prose, I can dip into translation from time to time and enter the world of a poem for a while, and then emerge. That can help with a dry spell, actually—I find translation to be a creative practice that supports the other practices (just as writing poems feeds translating poems). Translating alters my thinking, my relationship to language, rhythm, image, space, and that's always a good thing.

But to return to your question about the rhythms of writing: when possible, I do try to write first thing in the day, as soon as I arrive at my desk, because the older I get, the more my best energy is my first energy. (I used to be a night owl and was able to write late at night, but thanks to a wonderfully full family life, that's no longer true.) I find that if I've written something before I start hog-wrestling the other tasks in front of me, the day goes better and feels more satisfying.