

ALTA: the final threshold for Message in a Bottle Translators

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CAMBRIDGE WAS CHILLY at this time of year but it was warm in the sunshine. My hotel room looked out across the Charles River to the Boston skyline. A slight breeze pirouetted over the water, kicking up tiny waves that scurried downstream and disappeared. A lone oarsman sculled past under a clear sky.

After a fortifying breakfast of Irish oatmeal I was ready. Today was the day! The long-awaited moment when the Message in a Bottle Translators would present their anthology of translations at the ALTA conference. The creation and publication of *Thresholds* had taken two years, and this appearance at the annual gathering of our literary translation peers had loomed ahead of us like a beacon in the distance and a rite of passage of sorts. A tantalizing threshold, if I may.

The group gradually assembled, arriving at Logan airport at various times during the week. Some had committed to a variety of activities at the conference, and the busy program featured events such as Ingrid Lansford reading from her translation of Birgit Biehl; the globe-trotting Liliana Valenzuela reading Lina Zerón's poetry and presenting a panel on the Rise of Spanish Publishing in the U.S.; and Traci Andrighetti, reading from Adolfo Albertazzi.

Conference attendees faced the torment of having to decide between conflicting workshops with seductive names like *Seeing Ourselves as Others See Us*, *Translating Opera*, *Translating Rhyme & Meter*, and *World Literature Today*. As ALTA President David Ball so presciently put it in his welcoming statement in the program: "I'm looking forward to hearing your laments about

too many panels—and readings, and events—that you really wanted to go to, but couldn't because there were just too many of them and you had to choose."

At ten o'clock on Saturday morning we gathered in the Haym Saloman room, where four of us were scheduled to read from our contributions to *Thresholds*. Marian Schwartz introduced us, then each took the podium in turn: Michele McKay Aynesworth, Jonathan Cole, myself, and Zoya Marincheva. The hallway outside the room was teeming with tormented translators trying to decide which event to attend. Some actually chose us, for which we were very appreciative and read for them with all the passion and brio we could muster. Poems and stories that had been polished, edited, and lovingly polished again came alive as they were read aloud by their translators. The applause was as a balm for the soul, and when we stood and acknowledged the audience I'm sure we all felt the surge of emotion that invariably accompanies a significant accomplishment of some kind.

After that splendid event the group fragmented and people went their own way. I joined Albert Bork (from Alpine) and Wilenne Berber (from Fort Worth) and took a cab to Harvard Square. We went immediately to have a large cup of hot chocolate in a crowded place that Albert knew, enjoying the kind of cozy, northern atmosphere we seldom experience in Texas. Then we walked for a while in the brisk afternoon air, my hands

thrust deep into my pockets and beret pulled down over my ears, glad to be wearing the overcoat that spends virtually all its time hanging in my closet in Austin.

A musician played in the Square. His amp was good and his music sweet, and we stood listening for a while, the winter sunshine warming our shoulders. Then on to browse in the organized chaos of the Grolier Poetry Bookshop, and at Schoenhof's, the store that assembled the book room at the conference.

As evening fell the group reassembled and went for a triumphant dinner at the Casa Portugal on Cambridge Street. It was the perfect spot for our mood, and there was much laughter and toasting and wit. The food was excellent, and in due course it became apparent that, in addition to the Message, the Bottle also contained a goodly supply of Portuguese wine.

Back at the hotel we huddled in a group in the empty lobby, talking and giggling for a long time. Nobody wanted the day to end. But it finally did, and *Thresholds* is now a reality—one more dream come true. ★



MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE TRANSLATORS, L-R: Marian Schwartz, Jonathan Cole, Tony Beckwith, Zoya Marincheva, Traci Andrighetti, Michele McKay Aynesworth, Ingrid Lansford, & Liliana Valenzuela.