

musician. He put down his guitar and picked up a machine gun.”

Life as a revolutionary during the siege of Nablus is a hard one. Starvation, dehydration, wounds, death, and the mental deterioration that comes from the constant stress of imminent attack work under the skin of the brothers and their fellow soldiers. The boys’ love for each other, their family, and certain women can become either a saving grace or turn brittle under the stress.

Khalifeh offers a Jerusalem beyond that which is delivered to foreign audiences through television and newspapers. She gives us humans with their own emotions and reasons, characters we want to help, people for whom we want to stop the tanks, bulldozers, and bombs. When Ahmad crosses an emotional barrier and becomes a flaming icon, instead of routine disgust and hateful despair, readers may want to flip back pages of time and smooth the hair on his young head, easing the burden he carries—the burden of too much love.

Finding Home

Isaac’s Torah (Other Press, 978-1-59051-245-6) is a very funny book about very sad events. Isaac Blumenfeld suffers at the hands of the Nazis, loses his entire family when his village is invaded, and is sent to a Siberian labor camp because of mistaken identity. But, incredibly, Bulgarian author Angel Wagenstein makes us laugh.

Naturally, Isaac would have much preferred a quiet life as a tailor, coming home to his wife and three children every day in their tiny village—which is at different times under the jurisdiction of three different ruling governments. But when history intervenes and sends him to various points of horror, he seems to be able to carry his home inside of him.

Two things contribute to this sense of placement. For one thing, his story is narrated as a series of letters to his brother-in-law, Rabbi Shmuel Ben-David. By fortuitous coincidence, the two old friends tend to meet up over years as if their lives were tangled and no amount of ripping or shredding could cut them completely asunder. Also, Isaac carries inside his head a party of commentators. For every occasion, a story about someone in a similar situation—or a completely different situation—comes to his mind and ekes onto the page: “Can you make the tiger eat grass...let alone keep a Jew from going off the straight path of his story...?” These stories and jokes make Wagenstein’s narrative welcoming, as if, even amidst the horror, he’s winking at his readers.

In *Isaac’s Torah*, a small village changes the government it answers to, while the inhabitants continue to exist as before, to the best of their abilities. In *The Pets*

(Open Letter Books/University of Nebraska Press, 978-1-934824-01-6), Icelandic writer Bragi Ólafsson gives us Emil Halldorsson, who experiences a similar dislocation in a more contemporary setting and without the drastic global consequences.

Soon after returning from London to his home in Reykjavik, Havard Knuttson, with whom Emil spent an ill-fated month house-sitting in London five years ago and hasn’t heard from since, is knocking at his door.

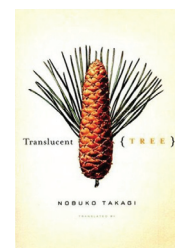
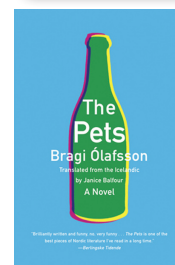
So reluctant is Emil to confront the man who proved himself a bad friend that he hides under his own bed, hoping Havard will assume he isn’t home to answer the door. Instead, Havard enters by the window and inserts himself into Emil’s life for the rest of the evening, affecting his relationships with friends, girlfriends, his mother, his music. People come, they stay, they go, and Emil, stuck under the bed, feels his own grasp on his identity and place in the world slip further and further afield.

How do we know we are who we think we are? Though tickled by doubtful feelings of dislocation even before he dives under the bed, Emil seems to live solidly in the world, but his sense of remove grows the longer he stays among the dust bunnies.

Ólafsson treats his characters with a light hand and a steady cadence. There’s no swooning prose for readers to confuse with Emil’s keenly felt, growing sense of displacement. Placing the main character under the bed turns out to be an ingenious way of allowing peeks into the private moments of friends and enemies; Emil, for better or for worse, has a view of the bathroom and not everyone sees the point in closing the door. He can only watch, listen, and wait for release. He is powerless.

We are all worlds unto ourselves; Emil, if he ever manages to extract himself, will never be the same.

The characters in *Translucent Tree* (Vertical, 978-1-934287-14-9) are steeped in love and also handle peripherally the concepts of home and belonging. In this novel, winner of the Tanizaki Award, Go and Chigiri meet again after twenty-five years. Go can still picture the teenage girl Chigiri once was, perched in a tree while a film crew, of which Go was a part, made a documentary about Chigiri’s father, the last swordsmith in the town of Tsurugi. Life (children, jobs, marriage) has exhausted both of them, but still they recognize each other and the attraction is immediate.



Angel Wagenstein / Bulgaria

Bragi Ólafsson / Iceland

Nobuko Takagi / Japan