Aviva Palencia: Alright, hello, today we are talking to Aga Gabor Da Silva, the winner of the 2022 Jules Chametzky Prize for translation for her translation of the poem "Can Always Happen" by Ewa Lipska from our Spring 2021 issue. The Chametzky Prize celebrates the best poem or prose in translation published by the Massachusetts Review in the previous two years. This year we're happy to celebrate the poetry of Lipska, who is considered one of the most important Polish poets today. She's won numerous awards and fellowships, and her work has been translated into many languages including Czech, Danish, Hebrew, Icelandic, and more.

Our interviewee, Aga Gabor da Silva, who translated "Can Always Happen," graduated from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she studied Lusophone Literatures and Cultures. She also holds a Masters in English Literature and Linguistics from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. Along with the Massachusetts Review, her translations have appeared in *Lunch Ticket*, *ANMLY*, and *Columbia Journal.* So hello again, thanks for coming and congratulations.

Gabor DaSilva: Well, thank you very much. It's an honor.

AP: I'm excited to be interviewing you. So, firstly, if you're willing, could you read out your poem for us?

GD: Oh wow, sure. Of course. Alright.

Can Always Happen by Ewa Lipska:

Corrosive times
can always happen. Forever young
old servant of morality.
Catches trout with bare hands.
A slippery salacious sin.

You can always become
a worse breed of pigeons.
A traitor to the motherland.

But motherland stays away
from politics. She's a bookkeeper of centuries.
She adds up. Subtracts. Takes notes.
Contract expiration
is out of the question.

You can run away from her. Leave.
Like our friend did.

Longing ate away
holes in his lungs.

When he came back to his country
he moved into an urn.

AP: Lovely, thank you. So, I think to start us out I'll ask you: who or what drew you to translation?

GD: In translation in general? So well, ever since I was little I've always liked languages, and I was born and I grew up in southwest Poland and in my town where I was born, Opole, the German minority was important. And so, which meant that when I started elementary school I had German and I started learning German when I was in second grade, I guess, or third. And so I didn't have English, but I really wanted to learn English and so I started watching cartoons. And I remember the channels: it was [the] Children's Channel and then Cartoon Network. And then when I went to high school I had English and I always liked other languages as well. When I went to college, I started studying English literature and linguistics in my hometown in Opole. I also had some experience with theater and that was in high school when I was drawn into recitation competitions, and so that was my exposure to poetry and to prose. And this together with English seemed like a natural way to start doing translations.

And so I remember that when I was in college, we were talking about– I think it was a poetry class, British poetry– and we were supposed to do a translation. Or, I mean, it wasn't mandatory, but we were asked if anyone wanted to do a translation of a particular poem. And I did that, so. And I never actually volunteered my response, and, you know, I wish I had, but I realized at that time that I really enjoy it. And also poetry, especially. Prose, as well, but there was always something– a stronger force– that drew me into poetry, so. That's how it started, like with the love of languages and with the exposure to poetry and prose through theater, basically.

AP: All right, so we also did a *10 Questions Interview*, a written interview, a little while ago.

GD: Right! Yes, yes.

AP: And in that you said, "I used to think of translation as a tug-of-war between the original text and the target language, and now I think of it more as a conversation between two people who start off as strangers but who later become close friends, although sometimes disagreeing with each other." Did you have that kind of relationship evolution with this poem?

GD: I did, I did. It was a very challenging poem. As I think I mentioned also in that interview, I felt a little intimidated at first. And when I was even reaching out to the publisher asking for permission to translate and then submit the poem, I thought, well probably it's not going to work. I mean, Ewa Lipska has been translated by, you know, Robin Davidson, Ewa Elżbieta Nowakowska, Susan Bassnett, Piotr Kuhiwczak– she already has her cohort of translators. She probably wouldn't be interested. But she actually was and she was the one who emailed me and said, "yeah, sure, do it." And when I chose this poem, at first I thought, *okay, so we have those unusual metaphors and this surprising syntax. How am I going to recreate this in English?*

And some choices were very, or came up after, you know, a long thinking and really having trouble coming [up] with those solutions or with those options. But once the poem was ready and I read through

it numerous times, I thought, *okay, so I think we agreed here*. I think, you know, the version that I came up with is… let's agree to disagree. Or, I think, let's agree. Yeah, I think that was the final outcome. But it was very challenging, yes.

AP: Sounds like a rewarding process, though.

GD: Yeah.

AP: So what was the research process like for this poem? You said, also in the *10 Questions Interview*, that you "dove into her poetic world." Could you tell us about that?

GD: Yeah, sure. So when I heard that Ewa Lipska was nominated for the Nike Literary Prize, which is a very prestigious prize in Poland, for *Internal Memory* and when I started reading that anthology, I also reached out to her previous volumes of poetry. There was the *Fingerprint Reader* or *Czytnik linii papilarnych* that was published in 2015. And so I started reading those two collections of poetry because they are similar in many ways. So when it comes to the topics, the tropes, you know, like history, politics, old age, solitude, but with "human" at the center of everything, that helped me get to know what her poetic world is essentially about.

I haven't had a chance to read *Dear Ms. Schubert* and also the translation that was published in 2021 by Robin Davidson and Ewa Elżbieta Nowakowska, but this is also a very interesting introduction to Lipska's poetry. But that was essentially the process. Reading through the poems, reading reviews about her poetry, reading about her, listening to podcasts or watching videos about Lipska, interviews with her, just to kind of get a better picture of what she writes about.

AP: Did you have a section that stood out to you most, either in the original Polish or, like a favorite part to translate?

GD: I think when it comes to that poem– so for example, even the first line, "corrosive times." That was something that really stood out to me because, you know, when we hear of times– they can be difficult, they can be hard. But I think "corrosive" is something that we may not think about immediately, but still, it seems like such a pertinent and such an insightful metaphor. You know, it's almost visual. You can almost see what corroding does.

AP: Absolutely.

GD: So even just the first line was, you know, shocking enough. And another thing that was also in Polish, I mean, especially in Polish, but also in English I think it also does translate this feeling and this vision. But another thing that I was, I guess, proud of as a translator when it happened was the last line of the first stanza: "Slippery salacious sin," because the alliteration is not present in the original. But when I started translating and then those words, you know, became alliteration, and I thought that it was just like that added value, let's say, to the translation.

AP: Yeah, I agree.

GD: So this is something that stood out. And then you know, we have those metaphors, this inventive use of language. And then we have this second stanza, "You can always become/ a worse breed of pigeons," right? So, something surprising. Something very, maybe common because we see pigeons all the time, but we never think about a hierarchy within that world. Especially that pigeons are usually considered a little lower, let's say, on that. So if you can become, how can you become a worse breed of pigeon? So I also like that juxtaposition of something unexpected with something common and yet written in a way that does provoke to thinking. And that's definitely in the original when I was reading that poem, that's why I also decided to include it in the poems that I submitted to *Mass Review*.

AP: I was going to say about "slippery salacious sin," I like that you not only have the alliteration of the "s", but also the "l", of course.

GD: Right, right, that's true.

AP: It doubles down on it.

GD: Yeah, oh wow. Yeah, I hadn't thought about that. Thank you.

AP: Sure! Let's see. So the Chametzky prize is in part a response to the "great need for literary journals to internationalize" through a focus on translation. Was there anything about Polish poetry as a whole, or about Ewa Lipska['s] poetry that you wanted to convey to an international audience?

GD: I think when it comes to… I think it's a very difficult question, actually, because you know, bearing the fact that she has been translated to English by several translators and all of them see the value in her poetry and value her poetry so much, it's hard to say. But I think that the way she observes reality, the fact that she's such an acute observer of reality, the fact that she talks about so many things, that history is also very present in her poetry, which I think can give an insight to foreign readers about Poland itself. Well, Lipska was born in 1945. She was in Poland, also in Vienna a little bit, but she was there during communism so some of her poems, or actually quite a few of her poems, do talk about this, but she never talks about politics directly or about communism directly.

But I think this is also something that is important to, through her poetry, inform the reader and let the reader know about a little bit of the history of Poland and of the hardships and what life was like during that time. But I think another thing is that inventive use of language, of those poetic tropes, of those topics that she mixes all the time, and those surprising metaphors, something that just is refreshing. And I think this is something very valuable to international poetry so that everyone can find something in that poetry that can provoke them to thinking and can relate to them in different ways.

AP: Yeah, your translation– what I got from it was that she's very efficient. She doesn't waste space and everything packs a punch.

GD: Right, right exactly and everything has a, every line is charged with this energy. Yes, I agree.

AP: Yeah. Were you trying to preserve any of the linguistic features of Polish in this translation?

GD: Like, for example, sound? Or what do you mean, like?

AP: Well, I think syntax is the one that comes up most often.

GD: Sure. Yes, I think when it comes to– let me look for the original so that I also have that in front of me. Original Polish… I think I have that somewhere… sorry about that.

AP: No problem! I have an example question, actually. So is Polish a pronoun-dropping or, like, subject-dropping language?

GD: Yes, yes.

AP: Yeah, so in the line "catches trout with bare hands," those short lines, is that a product of the pronoun-dropping?

GD: Right, exactly, so this is actually something that I was meaning to say. So in the original, it's actually a female, so the "forever young/ old servant of morality" is female from what we read and so this is something that I decided to drop in the translation, but I think that's something that is open to discussion, of course, you know, about translations.

AP: Right.

GD: But even when it comes to syntax, for example. So in the original, it actually starts "can always happen corrosive times." But it just didn't sound right in English to me, or it didn't sound clear, and so that's why I decided to switch that. So there were some instances in which I had to play a little bit. For example, there was also another poem that I also like. Let me find this one, it's. . . right. So this is the *Spinning Hope,* it's called *Spinning Hope*. And then the original, it's called *Wirująca nadzieja*. And so there is a stanza here where it says, "Coś się przegrało. / Gdzieś się nie skręciło. / Nie zostało się w mieście / w którym gotowała się miłość". And here she starts with, "Something was lost, somewhere some turn wasn't taken, one didn't stay in the city where love was being born." And it's also surprising because in the original this stanza rhymes, which is something not typical of Lipska. She doesn't use rhymes usually. And so, I thought, *okay, first of all, I would like to keep the rhyming here because I think it's important.* And so I translated it into "Someone failed to be the winner. / Someone did not take the right turn. / Someone did not stay in the town / where love was being born," just to also preserve that rhythm. But I did have to introduce this "someone" which wasn't in the original. In the original, it was like "something was lost," right? So these were some of the some of the things that I decided on. But I'm sure that you know other translators would have other ideas, and that's, you know, part of the beauty of translation and retranslation, right?

AP: Exactly.

GD: But yes, there were definitely many instances where Polish had to be– where the original was especially challenging with translation and just required some more work and some more thinking and more moments where I would just– *OK. I need a break. I have to do something else and then come back and see whether I have a better idea.*

AP: Thank you for that. For me, something that I like hearing most about is the details. So in your *10 Questions Interview* you talked about how you were working on the translation of *The House on Mango Street* with a friend. How was the collaboration? Was the translation process for Lipska's poem collaborative at all? And if not, how does it compare to the collaborative process on *The House on Mango Street*?

GD: So actually on Lipska, I worked on my own, and what I did was when I had the poems ready, I asked a friend of mine who used to work at the same university– the university that I work [at] now. He's also a writer and an editor, a proofreader, so we would get together and he would read the poems and then he would give me some suggestions. And that was really invaluable. So on Lipska I was working on my own. But yes, so I have this friend of mine who is based in Poland. She's actually going to start a PhD. She's also a great translator, and so we have some projects that we would like to push forward. One of them is an anthology of contemporary Polish writers that would include, for example, queer writers– poets, basically.

So this is something that we have that we have in mind. And this collaboration, I think, is very interesting and. And I like how we can exchange our ideas, how sometimes one person proposes something that the other one hadn't thought of and that makes sense or someone disagrees with a certain idea. And I really like that dynamic, kind of back and forth, because I think it just really adds to and just provokes to thinking and just, you know, makes you think about something in a way that you hadn't thought of before. And I'm curious to know what, for example, the collaboration between Robin Davidson and Ewa Elżbieta Nowakowska looks like, too, or any other translators. For example, some poems by Lipska were translated by Susan Bassnett and Piotr Kuhiwczak. I think it would be great to know what that looked like too, especially if we have people who are native speakers of different languages, right? So English and Polish. That may, you know, add to a different experience too.

AP: I'd imagine it adds kind of another leg of that growing friendship dynamic between you, the text, and now another person.

GD: Oh yes, definitely. It's definitely another level of another realm.

AP: My last question is just an open-ended question about your future projects. You mentioned things like working on a Wikipedia article–

GD: Right.

AP: –but that was a year ago. What's happening these days?

GD: So yes, Clarice Lispector and translating from Portuguese into Polish is still on my mind, and I think, you know, will always be. I would love to. I already, I started– but it's something that I would have to definitely expand– is to translate Lispector's children's literature and that hasn't been published yet in Poland. I have to admit that last year was very difficult. I can use "corrosive," too. Because, so there's one book that I'm reading right now. I started it, it's called *Bezmatek* by Mira Marcinów. It's a Polish novel. It's a collection of memories, actually. And "bezmatek" is a title that means, in English, when we have a bee family that doesn't have a mother. So this is a term that is used in, you know, among beekeepers and in that surrounding. And so it's basically a collection of memories about a mother. So it's written from the perspective of a daughter who has to cope with grief after her mother's premature, I mean, her mother's death.

And this is something that is very relevant to me because, well, next month it will be exactly one year since my mom passed away after a very– well, her cancer diagnosis came as a shock to me, my family. So last year was all about grieving and I discovered how grieving, grief, the process has, you know, so many different faces. At first I thought that you are just sad and you maybe cry a lot, but then I started observing certain things in my behavior. For example, problems with memory or, complete inertia, numbness, or death anxiety and that was– and when I started reading about it, I realized that, yes, it's actually also grieving. So just discovering, you know, being in that process was a very profound and complex experience and so that book that I'm reading now is mostly to, I think, honor the memory of my mom. Also since many of those emotions will be coming back, I wanted to kind of, you know, cherish them in a way by reading about this as well. So that past year was also a year in which I wasn't very much thinking about, you know future projects, what to do.

AP: Sure.

GD: But it was definitely something that allowed me to just look deeper into myself. And then, you know, so many of Lipska's poems, for example, talk about longing, talk about solitude, that they also seem applicable. And even when it comes to, you know, the past two years of the pandemic. . . I think those topics also can also be brought up and maybe refrained. So yes, I do have some projects in mind, but for the time being I'm, let's say, taking it slow. And there is also a big change coming in my life because I'm currently expecting my second child. So this is also something that just, you know, is very interesting about life in general. You have this cycle, right? You have, you know, death, you have life. It's just there are a lot of things going on now that I think are very poetic, too, I have to say, you know, when it comes to all those topics. I mean, we read about them.

But yes, definitely, I would really love to continue working on internal memory and, you know, toward publishing it. I think it's a wonderful collection of poems. And actually, maybe even do a selection of poems from [those] three volumes of poetry that she published in 2015. So that was the *Fingerprint Reader*. 2017 was the *Internal Memory* where the poem "Can Always Happen" comes from. And then in 2019, she published another volume of poetry titled, *Love and Safe Mode*. So they are all related, so I think it would be a fascinating project to do a collection that would include selected poems from all those three volumes of poetry. So this is something that is definitely on my mind.

AP: Yeah, that's great. We await anything that comes out, but of course focusing on yourself is priority.

GD: Right, right. Yes, but right there there is a lot of poetry in grieving, too. I think, you know, just looking into yourself, I guess.

AP: Yeah, yeah, extremely reasonable.

GD: Observing. There's a lot of observing. A lot of observing.

AP: Mmhm. That is all on my end.

GD: Oh wow. Wow, yeah, thank you very much for that. That was wonderful. I really wanted to talk, I think, to someone. Of course I was scared. I thought, hey, I can always ask Aviva to just send me those questions.

AP: Oh yeah.

GD: But it would be a–I think it's just such a great way to meet even if we're, you know, far away. I'm in, you know, a different time zone, too. But yeah, so it was a pleasure talking to you. Thank you.

AP: I'm so glad. And likewise!