

# Taking on the CULTURE AT LARGE

**10 years, 100 titles,  
and 100,000 books later—  
Open Letter continues to reinvent  
the world of literary translation.**

*By Kathleen McGarvey*

**T**his spring the special collections of University Libraries took into its holdings the papers of Open Letter Books. Boxes of annotated manuscripts, proofs, cover mock-ups, correspondence, and more headed to the archives to be sorted and cataloged for safe keeping in perpetuity. It was a striking sign that the once upstart literary translation press is now a little gray around the temples. But its agenda remains as unconventional and ambitious as ever.

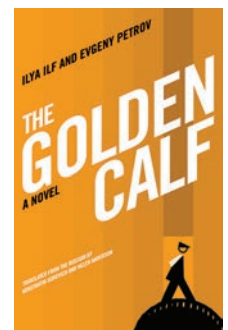
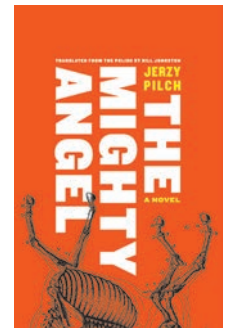
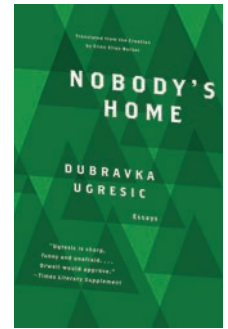
Marking the 10th anniversary of its founding this year—with celebrations around the country (see sidebar)—Open Letter is looking eagerly toward its next decade. With its editorial processes firmly established, the publishing house is ready to sharpen its focus on attracting people to the pleasures and rewards of reading globally.

Based at Rochester, Open Letter is unusual in several ways. Few university-housed presses produce trade books, as Open Letter does, rather than academic books, and Open Letter is one of only a handful of publishers to offer literature in translation exclusively. And, thanks to the University's support, the nonprofit press can give priority to cultural value, not marketability, when it chooses books for publication.

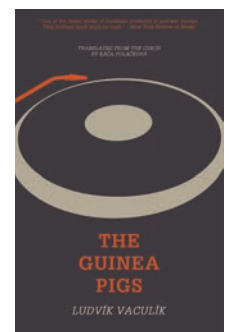
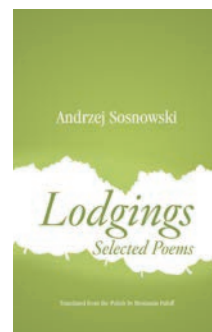
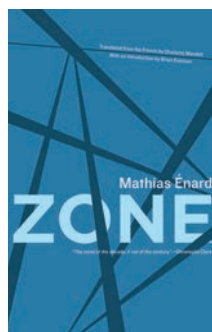
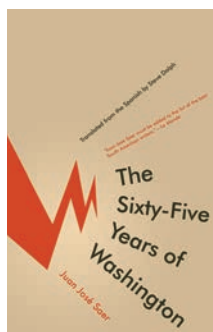
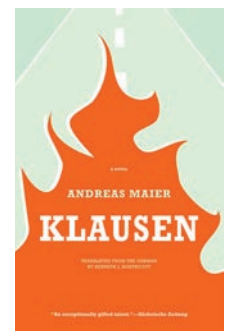
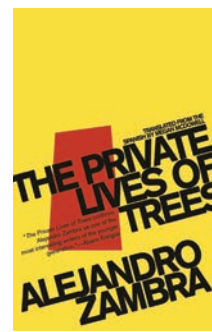
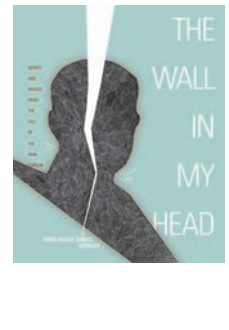
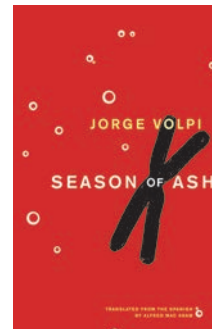
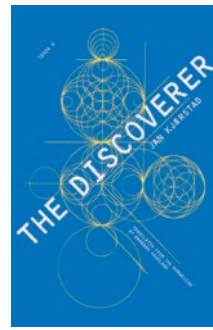
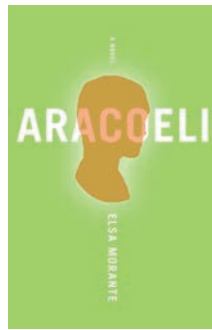
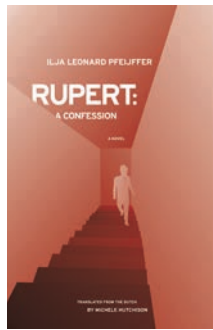
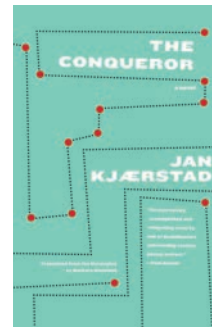
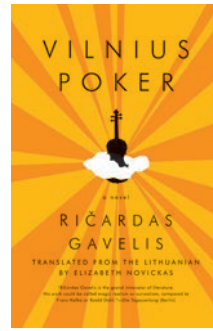
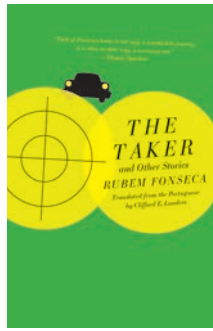
That's not to say that cultural value doesn't sell. Open Letter hit the milestone of 100,000 books sold more than two years ago. This spring, it will publish its 100th title: *Fox*, by Argentinian writer Rodrigo Fresán and translated by Will Vanderhyden '13 (MA). Fresán will be the featured speaker for the University's Plutzik Reading Series on April 24.

But Chad Post, the publisher at Open Letter, says producing books is only a part of the press's work. "It's not enough to print a book. It's important to have people engage with it, and we're figuring out new ways to do that."

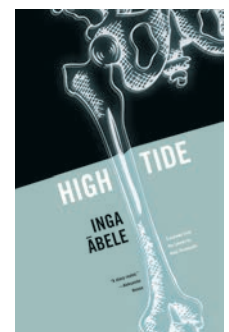
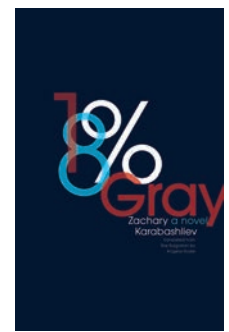
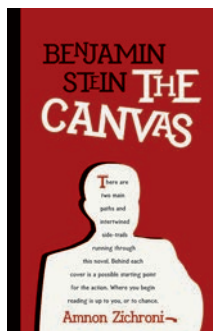
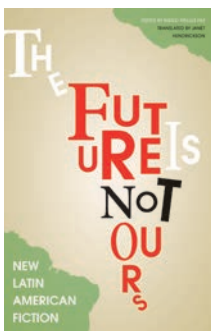
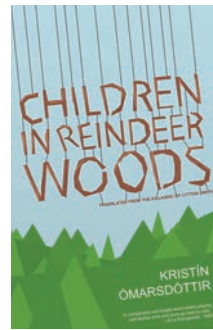
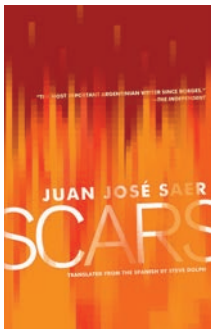
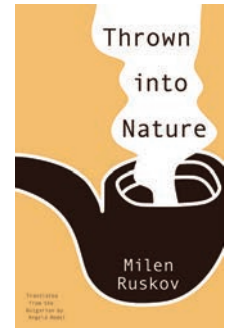
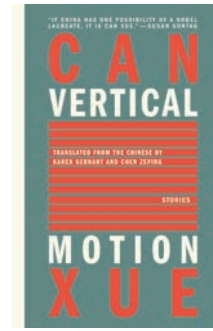
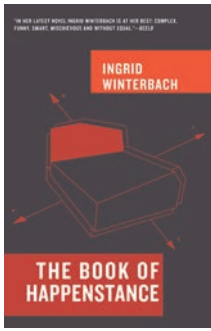
Ten years in, the press—despite its small size—is one of the giants for world literature in English.



1. **Nobody's Home**  
Dubravka Ugresic  
September 2008
8. **The Mighty Angel**  
Jerzy Pilch  
April 2009
15. **The Golden Calf**  
Ilya Ilf and  
Evgeny Petrov  
December 2009
22. **To Hell with Cronjé**  
Ingrid Winterbach  
September 2010



- 2. **The Pets**  
Bragi Ólafsson  
November 2015
- 3. **The Taker and Other Stories**  
Rubem Fonseca  
November 2008
- 4. **The Sailor from Gibraltar**  
Marguerite Duras  
December 2008
- 5. **Vilnius Poker**  
Ričardas Gavelis  
January 2009
- 6. **The Conqueror**  
Jan Kjaerstad  
February 2009
- 7. **Landscape in Concrete**  
Jakov Lind  
March 2009
- 9. **Death in Spring**  
Mercè Rodoreda  
May 2009
- 10. **Rupert: A Confession**  
Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer  
June 2009
- 11. **Aracoele**  
Elsa Morante  
July 2009
- 12. **The Discoverer**  
Jan Kjaerstad  
September 2009
- 13. **Season of Ash**  
Jorge Volpi  
October 2009
- 14. **The Wall in My Head**  
Words Without Borders  
November 2009
- 16. **Ergo**  
Jakov Lind  
January 2010
- 17. **The Museum of Eterna's Novel**  
Macedonio Fernández  
February 2010
- 18. **Gasoline**  
Quim Monzó  
May 2010
- 19. **A Thousand Peaceful Cities**  
Jerzy Pilch  
July 2010
- 20. **The Private Lives of Trees**  
Alejandro Zambra  
July 2010
- 21. **Klausen**  
Andreas Maier  
August 2010
- 23. **The Ambassador**  
Bragi Ólafsson  
October 2010
- 24. **The Sixty-Five Years of Washington**  
Juan José Saer  
November 2010
- 25. **Zone**  
Mathias Énard  
December 2010
- 26. **The Selected Stories of Mercè Rodoreda**  
Mercè Rodoreda  
February 2011
- 27. **Lodgings: Selected Poems**  
Andrzej Sosnowski  
March 2011
- 28. **The Guinea Pigs**  
Ludvík Vaculík  
May 2011



- 29. **The Book of Happenstance**  
Ingrid Winterbach  
July 2011
- 30. **Guadalajara**  
Quim Monzó  
July 2011
- 31. **My Two Worlds**  
Sergio Chejfec  
August 2011
- 32. **Vertical Motion**  
Can Xue  
September 2011
- 33. **Karaoke Culture**  
Dubravka Ugrešić  
October 2011
- 34. **Thrown into Nature**  
Milen Ruskov  
November 2011
- 35. **Scars**  
Juan José Saer  
December 2011
- 36. **The Smoke of Distant Fires**  
Eduardo Chirinos  
January 2012
- 37. **The Cyclist Conspiracy**  
Svetislav Basara  
March 2012
- 38. **Children in Reindeer Woods**  
Kristín Ómarsdóttir  
April 2012
- 39. **My First Suicide**  
Jerzy Pilch  
May 2012
- 40. **The Planets**  
Sergio Chejfec  
June 2012
- 41. **The Future Is Not Ours**  
Diego Trelles Paz  
July 2012
- 42. **The Canvas**  
Benjamin Stein  
September 2012
- 43. **Maidenhair**  
Mikhail Shishkin  
October 2012
- 44. **Dark Times Filled with Light**  
Juan Gelman  
November 2012
- 45. **A Thousand Morons**  
Quim Monzó  
December 2012
- 46. **18% Gray**  
Zachary Karabashliev  
January 2013
- 47. **Tirza**  
Arnon Grunberg  
February 2013
- 48. **When We Leave Each Other**  
Henrik Nordbrandt  
April 2013
- 49. **A Short Tale of Shame**  
Angel Igov  
May 2013
- 50. **Two or Three Years Later**  
Ror Wolf  
June 2013
- 51. **L'Amour**  
Marguerite Duras  
July 2013
- 52. **High Tide**  
Inga Åbele  
September 2013



“Open Letter is one of the most important sources of international literature in the U.S.,” says Ira Silverberg, a senior editor at Simon & Schuster and the former literature director for the National Endowment for the Arts. Post’s “commitment to keeping literature lively through an impressively broad publishing program of translation is a godsend to literary readers, reviewers, and booksellers alike.”

The press publishes 10 books each year—largely novels, but also poetry, stories, and literary essays. Its specialty is contemporary literature, and its booklist spans the globe: countries of origin include Algeria, Chile, China, Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Italy, Korea, Mexico, Serbia, and South Africa, and Open Letter’s reach expands all the time.

Open Letter is also the cornerstone of the literary translation studies program at Rochester, which offers a certificate for undergraduates and a master of arts degree in literary translation studies. Students can participate in internships with publishing houses, including Open Letter, where graduate students also acquire expertise in the theory and practice of translation publishing.

## A Translation Near You

Open Letter is hosting a series of events this year at bookstores across the country. For details, visit the press’s website at [Openletter.org](http://Openletter.org).

### Boston

Harvard Book Store

### Chicago

Volumes Bookcafe

### Dallas

Deep Vellum Books

### Houston

Brazos Bookstore,  
April 28

### Los Angeles

Skylight Books

### New York

Gala at the Goethe  
Institute, May 10

### Portland

Powell’s Books

### San Francisco

Green Apple Books  
on the Park

### Seattle

Elliott Bay Book  
Company

“As we become a more global society, and as the need for a deeper cultural understanding continues to increase, the work of Open Letter and other similar presses only grows in importance,” says Gloria Culver, dean of the School of Arts & Sciences. The press “plays an important academic and programmatic role in our offerings.”

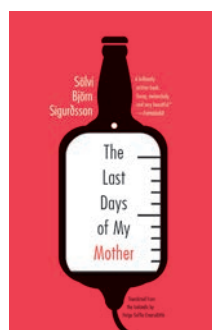
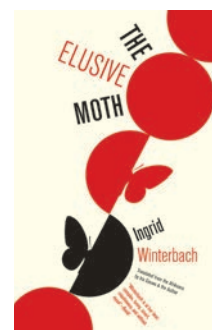
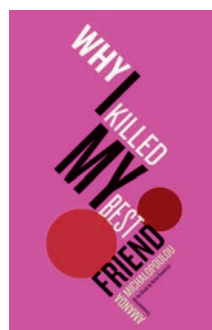
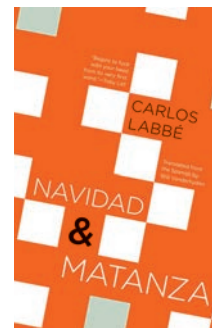
Post says the qualities of a good translation are just what they were when the press started out. At root, it’s about a translator with an unmistakable confidence in the narrative voice of the text. An adept translator pushes past the purely technical, “moving away from the original text in specific ways, based on how they know English reacts. For example, if the book has a cynical tone in Bulgarian, in English it will have the same cynical tone—but the words won’t be the same, because cynicism is slightly different in an American context.”

But the book industry has changed dramatically in the last 10 years. When

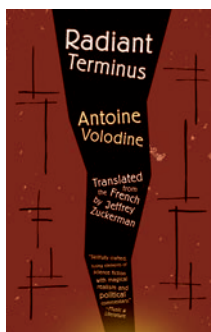
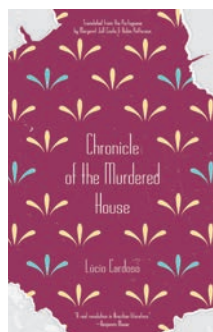
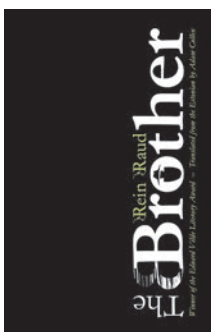
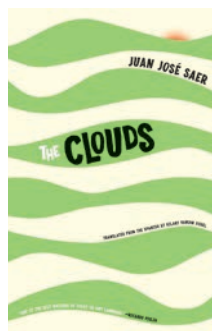
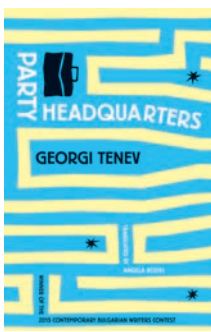
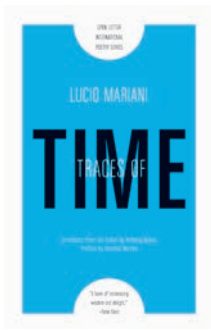
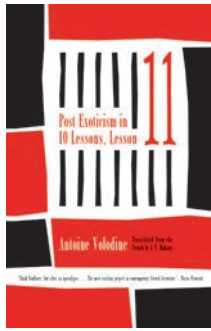
Open Letter began, it relied on independent booksellers and reviewers to help readers find the press’s books. “Even 10 years ago, you could still rely on a *New York Times* book review to help sell at least a couple thousand copies,” says Post. “Getting certain starred reviews and physical print reviews were key.” That’s not the case anymore. The conversation has moved online—and into bookstores, which have seen their fortunes fall and rise again during Open Letter’s lifetime.

As the market has fragmented, “we’re dealing with individual people and not with big institutions that used to be game-changers,” says Post.

He’s addressing the issue head-on, with innovative strategies to encourage people in reading translated works. The “Two Month Review” podcast is the newest offering. A weekly



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| 53. <b>The Dark</b><br>Sergio Chejfec<br>October 2013                          | 54. <b>Everything Happens as It Does</b><br>Alben Stambolova<br>November 2013 | 55. <b>Elsewhere</b><br>Eliot Weinberger<br>March 2014                                    |
| 56. <b>This Is the Garden</b><br>Giulio Mozzi<br>January 2014                  | 57. <b>Europe in Sepia</b><br>Dubravka Ugresic<br>February 2014               | 58. <b>Navidad &amp; Matanza</b><br>Carlos Llabé<br>April 2014                            |
| 59. <b>Why I Killed My Best Friend</b><br>Amanda Michalopolou<br>May 2014      | 60. <b>La Grande</b><br>Juan José Saer<br>June 2014                           | 61. <b>The Elusive Moth</b><br>Ingrid Winterbach<br>July 2014                             |
| 62. <b>The Last Days of My Mother</b><br>Sólvi Björn Sigurðsson<br>August 2014 | 63. <b>A Thousand Forests in One Acorn</b><br>Valerie Miles<br>September 2014 | 64. <b>The Man Between</b><br>Sean Cotter & Russell Scott Valentino, eds.<br>October 2014 |



- 65. **Street of Thieves**  
Mathias Énard  
November 2014
- 66. **In Praise of Poetry**  
Olga Sedakova  
December 2014
- 67. **Lies, First Person**  
Gail Hareven  
February 2015
- 68. **The Physics of Sorrow**  
Georgi Gospodinov  
April 2015
- 69. **Post-Exoticism in 10 Lessons, Lesson 11**  
Antoine Volodine  
May 2015
- 70. **The One Before**  
Juan José Saer  
June 2015
- 71. **Traces of Time**  
Lucio Mariani  
July 2015
- 72. **Rock, Paper, Scissors**  
Naja Marie Aidt  
August 2015
- 73. **The Things We Don't Do**  
Andrés Neuman  
September 2015
- 74. **Rochester Knockings**  
Hubert Haddad  
October 2015
- 75. **War, So Much War**  
Mercè Rodoreda  
November 2015
- 76. **Loquela**  
Carlos Labbé  
December 2015
- 77. **Party Headquarters**  
Georgi Tenev  
February 2016
- 78. **Bardo or Not Bardo**  
Antoine Volodine  
April 2016
- 79. **The Clouds**  
Juan José Saer  
May 2016
- 80. **Abahn Sabana David**  
Marguerite Duras  
June 2016
- 81. **One of Us Is Sleeping**  
Josefina Klougart  
July 2016
- 82. **Gesell Dome**  
Guillermo Saccomanno  
August 2016
- 83. **The Brother**  
Rein Raud  
September 2016
- 84. **A Greater Music**  
Bae Suah  
October 2016
- 85. **Justine**  
Iben Mondrup  
November 2016
- 86. **Chronicle of the Murdered House**  
Lúcio Cardoso  
December 2016
- 87. **Radiant Terminus**  
Antoine Volodine  
February 2017
- 88. **Frontier**  
Can Xue  
March 2017



45-minute podcast—now also live-streamed on YouTube—it’s exactly what its name suggests: a conversation about a book that extends over two months, breaking the book into small sections, each of which is the subject of a dialogue between Post, cohost and writer Brian Wood, rotating special guests, and readers.

“A lot of the focus in contemporary book journalism—if you can call it that—is basically just listing items,” Post says. “Books that are coming out right now, that are the next thing people should read. And then just passing by them immediately after that. No one ever comes back to talk about the book again. It’s always, what’s the next thing?”

“We decided that it would be much more valuable if we take a book and talk about it for two months. That way, people can engage with it at any point in time. And if you’re reading along, how hard is it to read 14 pages a week, or even 40? You can read the book slowly and enjoy it slowly. By reading that way, you’re getting a lot more out of it,” says Post. “You’re not just reading for the next plot point.”

The podcasts are buttressed by detailed posts on “Three Percent,” Open Letter’s blog, which is named for the percentage of books published in English that are translated from another language.

The closest model for the “Two Month Review” is podcasts that recap TV shows, says Post. “We’re treating it as popular culture and not something refined. It’s about changing the perspective. People treat international literature as difficult and erudite. We flip that and give it to readers in a way that’s how you’d treat normal popular culture. And through that, we engage with a lot more readers.”

The effects of the “Two Month Review” are showing up in Open Letter’s sales, and Post is eager to keep the project, now in its fourth season, moving forward.


For general readers, international literature can expand one’s sense of the world. “It exposes you to different world views, voices, and values,” says Post.

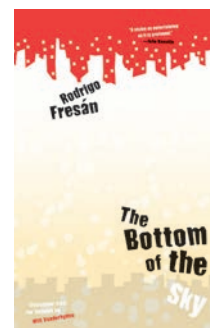
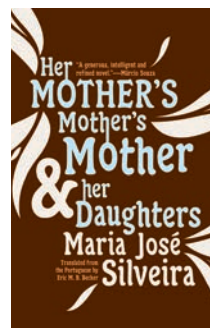
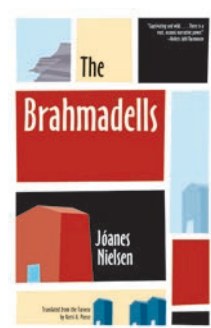
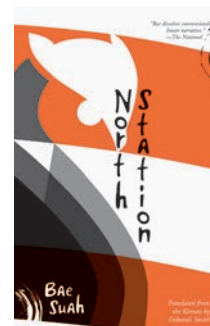
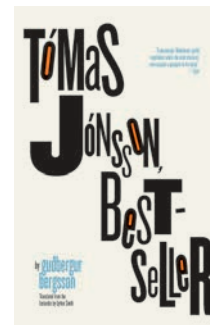
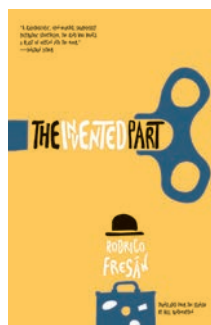
And for writers, it can offer a lesson in craft. “You get to see how novels or poems can be different from what you’re already used to, and they can expand your ideas of how to portray the human experience. Because writers around the world are approaching it in different and new ways,” he says.

Even the language benefits. “There’s an opportunity for English as a language to do things it hasn’t done before. You’re bringing in new terms or concepts that hadn’t previously existed in English in a single word. You’re trying to explain that, and it allows for the language to grow and expand.”

To Post, the work matters deeply, and that fuels his determination to recruit new readers and to spur conversations between readers and publishers. “‘Three Percent’ was incredibly unusual when it started,” he says, because it was about the literary translation publishing industry and about publishing books in general—and not just Open Letter’s books. The blog became a site of animated conversation, and big publishers, like HarperCollins and Houghton Mifflin, tried to follow suit. “We had an influence on the culture,” says Post.

And that’s what Open Letter is ultimately about. “All of our reader-development strategies have larger, altruistic ideas behind them. ‘Three Percent’ exists to raise awareness of international literature in translation and the issues that surround it. It’s not just about our books. And the ‘Two Month Review’ is about the importance of reading and ways to do it. It includes our books, but it’s broader than that.

“The intent behind all these things is to have an impact on the culture at large. And I don’t think that’s going to change.” 



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|--|---|---|
| <p><b>89. The Invented Part</b><br/>Rodrigo Fresán<br/>May 2017</p>                  | <p><b>90. Salki</b><br/>Wojciech Nowicki<br/>June 2017</p>  | <p><b>91. Tomas Jonsson, Bestseller</b><br/>Guðbergur Bergsson<br/>July 2017</p>        |
| <p><b>92. Island of Point Nemo</b><br/>Jean-Marie Blas de Roblès<br/>August 2017</p> | <p><b>93. If I Were a Suicide Bomber</b><br/>Per Aage Brandt<br/>September 2017</p>               | <p><b>94. North Station</b><br/>Bae Suah<br/>October 2017</p>                           |
| <p><b>95. The Brahmaddells</b><br/>Jóanes Nielsen<br/>November 2017</p>              | <p><b>96. Her Mother's Mother and Her Daughters</b><br/>Maria José Silveira<br/>December 2017</p> | <p><b>97. The Same Night Awaits Us All</b><br/>Hristo Karastoyanov<br/>January 2018</p> |
| <p><b>98. The Endless Summer</b><br/>Madame Nielsen<br/>February 2018</p>            | <p><b>99. Fox</b><br/>Dubravka Ugrešić<br/>April 2018</p>   | <p><b>100. The Bottom of the Sky</b><br/>Rodrigo Fresán<br/>May 2018</p>                |