Pierre Joris (1946-2025) in Memoriam, by Kate Deimling

Pierre Joris was a kind and friendly presence at PEN Translation Committee meetings for many years. Underneath his easygoing bonhomie lay a powerful linguistic creativity and a tenacious ability to grapple with the work of one of the most challenging authors of the twentieth century, Paul Celan.

Raised in Luxembourg, Pierre spoke French and German, along with Luxembourgish, the local Germanic dialect; he later moved to the U.S. and adopted the English language. Celan also grew up in a border zone between different languages: he was born into a German-speaking Jewish family in Czernowitz in Romania (now Chernivtsi, Ukraine) and lost both his parents to the Holocaust. Throughout his career, Pierre devoted himself to recreating in English the strange neologisms and multiple meanings of Celan’s German. His translations of Celan’s work include two major collections, Breathturn into Timestead: The Complete Later Poetry of Paul Celan (FSG, 2014) and *Memory Rose into Threshold Speech: The Collected Earlier Poetry* (FSG, 2020).

I continue to be struck by Pierre’s remarkable ability to recreate Celan’s spirit of invention and produce translations of surprise, vigor, and mystery. The poem “Why This Sudden At-Homeness” from Breathturn into Timestead begins:

Why this sudden at-homeness, all-out, all-in?

I can, look, sink myself into you, glacierlike,

you yourself slay your brothers:

earlier than they

I was with you, Snowed One.

At various points, Pierre also lived in England and Algeria and was very much at ease moving back and forth between languages, styles, and traditions. Authors he translated into English or French include Maurice Blanchot, Allen Ginsberg, Edmond Jabès, Jack Kerouac, Abdelwahab Meddeb, Rainer Maria Rilke, Habib Tengour, and Tristan Tzara. He also published over thirty books and chapbooks of his own poetry and several volumes of essays.

When Pierre received the PEN/Ralph Manheim Award for Translation in 2021, the PEN Translation Committee jury noted that “Joris’s personal trajectory has fueled his articulation of a ‘nomad poetics’ that cannot be contained by national or linguistic boundaries, one in which Anglo-European perspectives are enriched and complicated by those of the Global South, and where translation models the potentialities and necessary complexities of cross-cultural contact.”

Language play was an innate part of Pierre’s creative practice. In a [review of his last collection of his own poetry](https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-handful-of-mikado-sticks-on-pierre-joriss-interglacial-narrows/), *Interglacial Narrows* (Contra Mundum, 2023), Sneha Chowdhury quotes from his poem about a cormorant:

the only
cormorant

the only one
of my birds
left
 —is me

& I worry
that I may be
more rant
than
core.

Chowdhury writes: “When asked about the significance of cormorants in his work, Joris has noted that he is struck by their ability to fly straight in one direction while also intermittently shifting from their path to make ‘open-ended side-flights or -escapes.’”

With his open-ended side flights, Pierre Joris enriched our understanding of what translation can do, and his spirit of endless curiosity remains an inspiration.