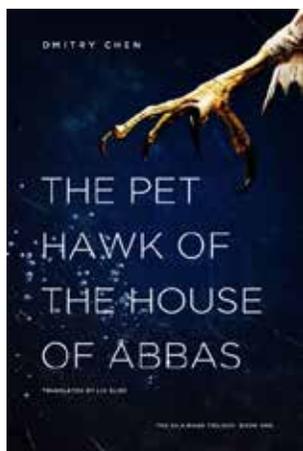


INTERVIEW WITH LIV BLISS, TRANSLATOR OF *THE PET HAWK OF THE HOUSE OF ABBAS* (RUSSIAN LIFE BOOKS, 2013)



From the editors: The Silk Road Trilogy by Dmitry Chen, of which Hawk is the first volume, was a runaway best seller in Russia. Our colleague and fellow SlavFile editor Liv Bliss spent the better part of a year translating this adventure novel of the 8th century, and, we suspect, losing her heart to its hero. Published and unpublished descriptions of her translation include words such as beautifully done, superb,

and masterful. We decided to interview Liv on this work and provide brief samples of her translated text juxtaposed with the original Russian so readers can see for themselves.

SF: *The Pet Hawk of the House of Abbas* seems an unusual title for a publishing house called Russian Information Services to take on. How did that come about?

LB: It is, as far as I know, a significant departure from the normal offerings from RIS Publications. I'm not actually privy to the back story — how Paul Richardson of RIS and Dmitry Chen, the author, first crossed paths — but I can tell you that RIS threw all its energies behind the project. There's a terrific web page (www.russianlife.com/books/fiction/silk-road-trilogy/) that has all the background anyone could want. It includes a three-part translator blog and a

video clip about the Sogdians, the ethnic group to which the hero of *Hawk* belongs.

SF: Are you primarily a translator of fiction?

LB: I wish! It's what I mostly did during my 18 months in Moscow as an in-house translator for Progress Publishers, but since I left, which is longer ago than I care to remember, I've done a few short stories and excerpts, a bit of poetry, and a whole lot of literary criticism, but exactly two novels that ended up being published. The one before *Hawk* came out a good six years ago. I'd love to do more; who wouldn't? But it's a tough market and a lot of top-class translators have already carved out their well-earned niches there.

SF: So how were you chosen for *Hawk*?

LB: By sheer, dumb luck, really. Paul Richardson of RIS had engaged me earlier for a few shorter pieces of fiction and must have thought I was a good match. It turned out to be the best fun I ever had without laughing.

SF: *The Pet Hawk* has been described as a challenging read. Do you think that's true, and if so, why?

LB: I think that comes from a combination of at least three factors. First, the book is set in a time and place that will be unfamiliar to most readers (and the



[pp. 47–48. Chapter 4: The Fourth Paradise]

The man charged with selling our house's silk in the Western lands, with furnishing it to Byzant by way of the market town of Lamos, had told me once that the Arabiya believe there to be four earthly paradises.

The first was where two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, converged, where the black soil known as sawad bore all the fruits and grains the soul could desire. And where to this day stand the ruins of prostrate Ctesiphon, capital of the unhappy, annihilated Kingdom of Iran. I had never been there, to the former Western territories of Iran whose name is Iraq, but the great round city of Ctesiphon with its huge-domed palaces was known and remembered by all.

The second paradise was the valley of Bavvan, which was also in Iran and of which, to my disgrace, I knew naught.

The third paradise was, of course, Damascus and its environs, so lush and green.

And the fourth paradise was the endless, flowering garden that lay between Samarkand and Bukhara—the Sogd river valley.

Which is exactly where I was.

Человек, который в нашем доме был занят сбытом шелка в западных землях — в Бизант через ярмарочный город Ламос — рассказал как-то, что по мнению людей народа арабийя в мире есть четыре рая.

Первый — это там, где сливаются две реки, Тигр и Евфрат, где черная земля — Савад — родит все фрукты и злаки, каких может пожелать душа. Где и сейчас стоят руины поверженного Ктесифона, столицы несчастного, уничтоженного иранского царства. Я не был там никогда, в этих бывших западных землях Ирана, носящих имя Ирак, но о круглом городе Ктесифоне, с его громадными куполами дворцов, знали и помнили все.

Вторым раем была долина Бавван в том же Иране — и, к моему стыду, я не знал о ней ничего.

Третий рай — это, конечно же, утопающий в зелени Дамаск и его окрестности.

А вот четвертый рай — это нескончаемый цветущий сад между Самаркандом и Бухарой. Долина Согда.

То есть как раз здесь.

few who claim expertise in the field will, of course, be able to search for factual infelicities, which should keep them happy). Also, we have here an author who has no interest in holding his readers' hands at every turn. (The marvelous map, family trees, and cast of characters at the beginning of the book and the glossary on the web page were definitely not his idea.) And finally, the book is a first-person narrative that has the narrator, and the readers with him, feeling his way through a confusing and turbulent time, figuring things out as he goes along.

It's an odd mixture — a rollicking good page-turner interlarded with that very Russian habit of suddenly dumping sizable amounts of information or speculation on the unsuspecting reader. But even when the pace of the story slowed, I could still feel the narrative energy. And it kept me wanting to know what was coming next.

SF: What was coming next? You didn't know?

LB: It's probably just an oddity of mine. I rarely read a piece of fiction too closely before diving into it. I want to be almost as surprised, puzzled, and delighted as I hope the reader will be. Which doesn't, of course, stop me from going back, shamefaced, and fixing things if I later discover I've been barking up the wrong tree.

SF: So you were emotionally invested in the text?

LB: Absolutely, from the first few pages. I quickly

fell in love with Nanidat Maniakh, the hero, because he is so human: warm, flawed, braver than even he knew, more vulnerable than he expected to be. He has a great sense of humor and, for all his many talents, knows not to take himself too seriously. I wanted everything to work out for him.

SF: And does it?

LB: Maybe.

SF: What particular translation challenges did you face with *Hawk*?

LB: It's not as though every part of it wasn't some kind of challenge — which is the way it should be — but the key issue for me was to find an appropriate voice for this first-person account, something that would bring authenticity to the narrator and his story, a tale that unfolds a long, long time ago, in the mid-8th century C.E., and far, far away. Although the Russian is pretty standard, drawing its exoticism from the unfamiliarity of time and place, I felt that the English needed something more to make the impact I was looking for. So, since I couldn't (even if I'd wanted to) write the thing in 8th-century English, I developed a few basic rules for the style: no modernisms, no blatant Americanisms, but also nothing so esoteric as to over-burden the reader or sound ridiculous (you know, "Beshrew thee, sirrah!" — none of that sort of thing). It was all highly subjective, of course, although I did find invaluable support in the usage histories in my Compact Oxford English Dictionary, which is the entire OED in two hefty volumes and

[p. 133. Chapter 9: Tell Me True!]

I was resting, resting with great gusto and in great earnest, and gazing thoughtfully over a plane tree's broad crown at an evening sky that gleamed like burnished copper and teemed with the coal-black crosses that were kites on the wing.

Two weeks had passed since my unforgettable supper with Barmak. I was sitting on a rug spread over the firm wooden floor of the veranda in my new home. In truth, I was not even sitting, but reclining, rather, propped on a careless elbow in a heap of well-stuffed cushions whose one side was rough to the touch while the other offered the caress of satin. And from time to time, I idly surveyed the oval enclosure within the fortress of Merv, stretched out now beneath my feet, where I had but recently earned my livelihood with a kalam.

Separated from my residence by a respectful distance, the crowd below buzzed—the women with braids wound in ribbons and glinting with silver ornaments and the men whose red beards and locks rose above a sea of motley garments. Between myself and all that magnificence were the heads and shoulders, clad in chain mail as if swathed in gray shawls, of Abu Muslim's warriors. For I was now settled in that part of the square where the ruler of Khorasan held sway.

It was tranquil here, and it was good.

Я отдыхал, отдыхал со вкусом и всерьез, задумчиво поглядывая туда, где над широкой листвой чинар сияло вечернее небо цвета начищенной меди, все в угольных крестиках коршунов в вышине.

Происходило это через две недели после незабываемого ужина с Бармаком. Я сидел на ковре, расстеленном на твердом деревянном полу веранды моего нового дома. Нет, даже не сидел, а полулежал, небрежно облокотившись на целую кучу упругих, шершавых подушек, одна сторона которых, впрочем, ласкала ладонь нежностью атласа. И иногда лениво оглядывал расстилавшуюся у моих ног овальную площадь внутри мервской крепости — ту самую, где я недавно зарабатывал себе на жизнь каламом.

Толпа на площади гудела в почтительном отдалении от моего жилища: женские косы, перевитые лентами и поблескивающие серебром украшений, или красные бороды и шевелюры над морем разноцветных одежд. Но все это великолепии было отделено от меня накинутыми на головы и плечи, как серые шали, кольчугами воинов Абу Муслима. Я помещался теперь в охраняемой ими части площади, там, где вершилась власть в Хорасане. Здесь было спокойно и хорошо.

"I have been more than twenty years at war," he said, with much effort in his rasping voice. "And, speaking with you, I have often thought that this is a man who, if he is spared can go where... Where... But I shall never see that place. And a pity it is."

"What place?" I urged him.

"The great Empire, sire," he sighed at last. "Its canals and rivers. Its palaces and their gardens. Chang'an. Its silk. What need have I to serve as commander in yet another army? Better to be a simple stable hand but to see even once that magical land..."

My ears filled then with the gentle sigh of strings plucked on the Imperial orchestra's multitude of qin, and I reclined on the cushions in a long silence. And then again I turned to my left.

"A simple stable hand? Tell me, Yukuk, could you learn maybe two hundred phrases in the language of the Han?"

"Not two hundred but more," he responded on the instant. "I know seven languages. In my youth I learned languages with ease. That's how I fell in with the berid, since they take ... they *took* people with particular talents."

Seven languages? I knew then that my small idea had come to me with a purpose. And I began to lay it out.

— Я более двадцати лет на войне, - с усилием просипел, наконец, он. — И, говоря с вами, я часто думал: вот этот человек, если уцелеет, может уехать туда, где... Где... А я это место не увижу никогда. А жаль.

— Какое место? — подтолкнул его я.

— Великая империя, господин, - вздохнул он наконец. — Каналы и реки. Дворцы среди садов Чанъани. Шелк. Зачем мне быть генералом еще одной армии? Лучше я простым конюхом увижу хоть раз волшебную страну...

Тут в моих ушах зазвучал нежный вздох струн множества циней императорского оркестра, и я замолчал надолго, улегшись на подушки. А потом снова повернулся влево:

— Простым конюхом? Скажи, Юкук, а мог бы ты выучить пару сотен фраз на языке народа хань?

— Не пару сотен, а побольше, — мгновенно отозвался он.

— Я знаю семь языков. Когда был юношей, учил их вообще без труда. Потому и попал в барид — туда берут... брали людей с особыми способностями.

Семь языков? Тут я понял, что моя маленькая идея возникла не напрасно. И начал ее излагать:

requires a magnifying glass or a great deal of squinting to read. A lot of linguistic decisions were made on the fly, because the last thing I wanted to do was lose my momentum, but I became reasonably comfortable with the way it was coming out. And when I read an Amazon reader review that said: "After putting it down and sleeping on it for 12 hours, I realized that for most of those hours I was thinking and talking to myself in a new sort of English" —by which the kind reviewer meant, I think, not his usual idiom — I was hugely relieved to have pulled it off (for him, anyway). After that, by the way, I decided to quit while I was ahead and not read any more reviews. What's done is done, after all.

SF: What did the author think of your approach? What role did he play in your work?

LB: I think he was OK with it. At least, he never said he wasn't, and he was quite outspoken, so I'm sure he would have objected if it sat badly with him.

Other than that, he was always there for questions and to explain to me things I didn't know I didn't know. We had to find a middle way — and I think we did — between my inclination to gloss everything and his to gloss nothing. He took occasional exception when he thought I had rendered a scene with too little of the cinematic effect he was going for — the moment captured in freeze-frame — so I would rework those passages. Whether to his satisfaction or not, I don't know, but I suppose he placed my efforts somewhere between good and good enough. I'd enjoy working with him again.

SF: *Pet Hawk* has been billed as the first book in the Silk Road Trilogy. When can we expect to see volumes two and three?

LB: I don't know. There are never enough resources to go around for all the books that deserve to be translated, but when — let's say "when" — funds are found and the call comes, I'll be there with bells on.

LIVE TWEETING COMES TO THE SLD

New this year, we will be featuring live tweeting from SLD sessions. Leadership Council member Ekaterina Howard, who came up with the idea, has also offered to organize a group of volunteer Tweeters. We are excited about this initiative, which will be helpful for people unable to attend the conference and also for attendees unable to be present at a specific session. If you're interested in volunteering, please see Ekaterina's announcement on page 15.