robert lowes

AN INTERVIEW WITH JESSE LEE KERCHEVAL

"I HAVE SO MANY PROJECTS GOING ON RIGHT NOW that if I say them all, I'll sound like a crazy person."

So says Jesse Lee Kercheval, a recent contributor to *december*. She's published two novels (*The Museum of Happiness* and *My Life as a Silent Movie*); a novella (*Brazil*); two collections of short stories (*The Dogeater* and *The Alice Stories*); four books of poetry (*World as Dictionary*, *Dog Angel*, *Cinema Muto*, and *Extranjera*) with another (*America that Island Off the Coast of France*) coming soon; a memoir (*Space*); and a popular textbook (*Building Fiction*) that encapsulates what she teaches creative-writing students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It's not only Kercheval's words that have spread across the literary world, but also her literary DNA. She is a mother of writers, or una madre de escritores, as she might say in Spanish. She writes poems in that language, too.

When I interviewed Kercheval for *december*, I found her in Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay. That Latin American country has become a second home over the past eight years, and the setting for her all-consuming passion now — translating Uruguayan poetry into English, which has added to her list of published books. Her ambition goes beyond ego. What helps keep her so crazy-busy is connecting Uruguayan poets to U.S. counterparts who will translate their work. To wind down, Kercheval plays the accordion. "I need some things in life that don't involve words," she says.

During our Skype interview, Kercheval left the same impression that her writing does — a self-effacing calmness, a sweetness like honey, and a stinging wit. Those qualities have endeared her to countless students, such as poet James Crews, who received his MFA at the University of Wisconsin in 2007. "She is one of the most encouraging and supportive teachers I've ever had," said Crews, author of *The Book of What Stays* and *Telling My Father*. "She always has time for younger writers. She

creates a community wherever she goes."

"Wherever she goes" has a special meaning for the peripatetic author and teacher. Kercheval was born in Fontainebleau, France, and her family moved to the United States when she was two years old. She came of age in Cocoa, Florida, within earshot of spacecraft launched from Cape Canaveral during the race to the moon in the 1960s. Those years are chronicled in her 1998 memoir *Space*, which marked a turn toward the autobiographical in her fiction and poetry as well. A dysfunctional yet beloved family (addict mom; workaholic dad) is one thing, but what if it's not altogether your real family in the first place? Kercheval still isn't sure who her biological mother is, but she's asked the question in veiled and not-so-veiled ways repeatedly in her work, characterized by the theme of disconnected people finding new connections.

France. Florida. Wisconsin. And now, for significant stretches every year, Uruguay. Every locale has shaped Kercheval's personal and literary voice in some fashion. *december* was lucky to catch up with her and hear that voice unmediated by text as it reflected on her multi-faceted life as a writer, and a mother of writers.

— Robert Lowes

Kercheval: Hello, Robert! Are you there?

December: Jesse Lee! Hi! I'm looking for your picture on my screen.

Kercheval: Here I am!

December: Hola! Como estas?

Kercheval: Bien, bien. When I live in the United States, I hardly get the chance to speak Spanish, as strange as that seems.

December: Talk a bit about your life in Uruguay. La vida en Uruguay.

Kercheval: It's my big thing now, translation. But it was completely by accident. My last sabbatical, I wanted to go someplace to learn Spanish. I had the whole mid-life crisis thing where I thought, "How could I've grown up in Florida and never learned Spanish?" Uruguay came up because my son, who was then 12, had to go to

school. And we said, "Oh, Montevideo, it's small and laid-back. He can go to school there easily." We came, and my son was the first person who fell in love with it, because Uruguay is not that odd to him. It's very European, so people eat all the same foods that we do. A third of them are Italian, so they eat pasta. I got down here and started learning Spanish and I had no intention of translating poetry.

But two things led to it. One is that it's a very odd kind of Spanish, so it gives you a particular niche as a translator. The other thing is that Uruguay is full of poets. My joke is that it produces two things in great abundance — poets and world-class soccer players. There are only 3.3 million people here.

December: How would you describe your everyday life in Uruguay?

Kercheval: It's been very quiet these past three months because it has been summer here. The entire city shuts down, and everyone goes to the beach. There are times when it seems like you could stretch out in the street and go to sleep. I've been quietly working on my translations, having folks over for dinner, going over to their house for dinner. And then there is usually a reading or two at night.

When I'm not translating, I'm trying to hook people up with other translators. My goal is for every Uruguayan poet to have his or her own American poet translator. And I hope that they would fall in love with each other and go on and translate more work. And it's worked. There are about 21 or 22 poets in *America Invertida* (an anthology of young Uruguayan poets edited by Kercheval) and there are about 10 books that have come out of it, or translated and looking for publishers.

I have so many projects going on right now that if I say them all, I'll sound like a crazy person. I have a book of poems, *The Arms of the Saguaro*, that I just translated, coming out next year by a wonderful Uruguayan poet named Laura Cesarco Eglin. Her grandparents were Holocaust survivors. And I finished a book by Idea Vilariño. I'm looking for a publisher. I have a couple of other manuscripts that I've done of individual poets. But I'm also working on about five anthologies, which is just crazy. There's one of Uruguayan poems of place — locations, cities, rivers — called *Taken by Light: Poems of Uruguay*. It will be published here in December, and in the United States in April.

December: What about your own fiction and poetry?

Kercheval: It's kind of been pushed out. I've written a few poems, but not many. I keep thinking that I'll get tired of translation and go back to non-fiction or fiction or poetry. But so far, I'm loving translation. It's a wonderful vacation from ego. I was running around at the AWP (Association of Writers & Writing Programs) conference in March trying to twist arms and get people to publish Uruguayan poets. That's my new life. I'm having fun.

December: When I read *Space,* Jesse Lee, it was clear that you were a big reader as a child. But I didn't see references to you writing poetry or fiction. How did you start to write?

Kercheval: I wrote some bad poetry in high school, but my most successful moment as a writer early on was a fantasy novel in middle school. I would type up a page or two and bring it to the cafeteria every day, and people would pass it around. If I showed up without it, people would be upset with me. I still have it in a binder. That was my first sense of having an audience. And probably if I'd gone that way, I'd have millions of dollars.

December: Were there any books or authors that got you excited about writing?

Kercheval: Because of where I went to college, Florida State University, I read a lot of Southern writers. William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor were big influences. I've always felt a deep kinship with Dickens. I love odd, extra characters.

December: Is it accurate to say that starting over and making new connections are important themes in your writing?

Kercheval: Yes. I think that's inherent in fiction. Someone said to me years ago that in a novel, someone steps off the curb and everything changes. A novel starts with some person under pressure, so things can't be the same. When I was a young mother, I'd noticed all the children's books start with the parents being killed off. In *James and the Giant Peach,* his parents are killed by a rhino on a beach. It's because you have to take someone who's lived this sheltered, set existence and put them at risk, and so by killing off characters — what am I up to in my fiction, (three) husbands

and a child? I have to be careful not to do it next time. But it's a way to put somebody under pressure, to see how you can continue to live the life you're living.

December: It struck me that your first novel, *The Museum of Happiness*, could qualify as magical realism.

Kercheval: I think so. I was mad for magical realism then. I wanted to have amazing things happen. There's the part at the end where one character is literally pulled through a movie screen into another location. I still love that. But I moved away from magical realism.

December: Why was that? I thoroughly enjoyed *The Museum of Happiness*.

Kercheval: I don't know. It just seemed like life got realer to me.

December: After *Space*, there's not only a move toward realism in your fiction and poetry, but also autobiographical elements — where you were born, and who your mother really was.

Kercheval: I know from years of teaching that young writers are very autobiographical. I wasn't. *The Museum of Happiness*, set in Paris in 1929, is not autobiographical. But I was writing autobiographical poems in *World as Dictionary* before the memoir. The thing about poetry — your aunt doesn't pick a poetry book at the supermarket. You don't have to worry about it much. People can be remarkably honest in poems. On the other hand, they're not memoirs. So if I need to tweak some fact, it doesn't have to be literally true. It just needs to make emotional sense. For example, in a poem, I wanted to combine my feelings about two friends who died and I made them one person. I wouldn't do that in a memoir.

Space was the most painful book I ever wrote. If I hadn't had a contract to honor, I'm not sure I would have finished it.

December: Why was it the most painful? The subject matter?

Kercheval: It's subject matter, true. And a memoir is hard because you have to be ruthlessly honest and show that you are not always doing the right thing. I remember writing some of that memoir kind of hunched over and holding my stomach because

I was physically in pain about it. Even though, as memoirs go, I didn't have a horrific childhood. It's just revisiting things in an honest way I found painful.

December: How did you come to wonder whether the woman who raised you was not your biological mother?

Kercheval: I received a letter after I published *Space* that implied that yes, I had been adopted, that my father had had a relationship with another woman whom I knew later in our life. And I still don't know. I think, but I don't know, that my birth mother was Jewish, and I don't know if she was given up for an orphanage in the Second World War. So it's interesting question to me, but it wouldn't be easy to find the exact answer, and I've gotten far enough to puzzle about what it means in my life without having gone through the trouble of finding anything out. Both my mothers, if they're both mothers, are dead, and none of the documentation from that period is good, and to get a DNA sample, I would have to chase my sister around without telling her why I'm doing it. I haven't gone to France and written a memoir about trying to find the truth. It feels pretty far from me now to think about the French thing, because I'm obsessed with Uruguay. I've gone in a different direction.

December: One of the things that fascinated me, Jesse Lee, is that when I read your work, certain incidents and narratives kept cropping up. You take material that appears in a poem and later put it in a novel. An example is "Life Considered as the 13 Locks of Le Canal St-Martin." It was first published in the Malahat Review. Passages of that poem appear as prose in the novel *My Life as a Silent Movie*.

Kercheval: That would be typical of me. When I wrote the poem, it was a real event. I was in Paris with my children and I had a little bag around my neck to put passports in along with a little notebook. I was writing poems while they were doing things. A number of years later when I was casting around for things for my characters to do in *My Life as a Silent Movie*, I had Emma's brother Ilya be the person who works on the boat (going through the locks) and there are no children in that. You could say I wanted to get extra use out of the material. But in some ways, poetry is almost a sketch, like a diary entry, and it's changed into something else.

December: Who are the some of the poets that you turn to again and again?

Kercheval: I mentioned Walt Whitman. I have a long running joke with my colleague. Ron Wallace, who's retired, that he represents Emily Dickinson and I represent Walt Whitman. They are the mother and father of American poetry. I always go back to Whitman. And Guillaume Apollinaire, all the surrealists. I love Kenneth Koch, who is someone in the New York School. He's disappeared a little now. Anne Carson is a Canadian poet who writes novel-length poems. And someone I find myself going back to is Wislawa Szymborksa, whom I really love.

But I'm reading a lot of new stuff, too. One young poet I'm excited about is a Wisconsin alum, Danez Smith. He's this young African-American poet who was a finalist for the National Book Award last year. Astounding. There's an amazing Argentinean poet, Alejandra Pizarnik, who was kind of the Sylvia Plath of Argentina. There's a wonderful new translation of her work out by Yvette Siegert titled *Extracting the Stone of Madness*.

I'm more and more influenced by poets from other countries now that I hang out with translators. Translators of poetry are generally poets, because there's no money in it. I'm not only the unpaid agent of Uruguayan poetry, I am the money-losing agent of Uruguayan poetry.

[ed. note: This is an excerpt of a longer interview with Jesse Lee Kercheval. To read the complete interview, please visit *december*'s website at decembermag.org/interview-jesse-lee-kercheval/]

jesse lee kercheval

STRANGER

You know nothing
of your future. You have
not even dreamed it. No
not even imagined it
yet. I see you walking
on the rambla in Pocitos
in brilliance of summer
& know nothing of you
Nothing

EXTRANJERA

No sabés nada
de tu futuro. Ni siquiera
lo has soñado. No, ni
siquiera lo has imaginado
todavía. Te veo caminar
por la rambla de Montevideo
en la brillantez del verano
y no sé nada de vos
Nada