# Translating a Peony

**by Ilya Kaminsky**

The challenges of translation from Asian languages are formidable. Here is an example of a brief poem by Kancho translated by various hands. First in the original:

kara-oto mo sukoshi iitaki botan kana.

And in word-by-word translation:

Chinese-sound even, a little-say-want, peony ‘tis!

Now, here are five different versions done by several translators, each claiming to be authentic:

the peony blooms: / I feel like making some / Chinese sounds

I’d like to say / some thing in Chinese / to the peony

my peony: / I’d like to treat it to / some Chinese

the peonies bloom: / I wish I could speak / a little Chinese

is that rustling / the peony saying something / in Chinese?

The multiplicity of meanings in the above versions of the same text is somewhat comic. Yet when we put all these versions together we also see how many different poems can be written with the same number of words; this shows us what a rich variety of possibilities the English language offers to its poets.

*Excerpted from the introduction to* [*The Ecco Anthology of International Poetry*](http://wordswithoutborders.org/books/#the-ecco-anthology-of-international-poetry)*, edited by Ilya Kaminsky and Susan Harris (Ecco Press, 2010.)*