

*If Not a Writer*

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If not a writer, then I would probably be a geologist. I majored in geology, was heading to graduate school in paleontology and then the doe-eyed dark angel touched my shoulder with a finger and the doctor said, third stage melanoma, let's go. In no time, I'd lost my spleen, a line of lymph nodes, a bear's mouthful of flesh and muscle over my shoulder blade, and a rectangle of skin, about the size of a City Lights paperback, that had been stripped for use as a graft. Lying in the hospital, nothing but words in my head, I began to imagine another way to love the earth, and to find something to stand on.

So it was the hospital, hideous theater, which altered my course, and I can't yet seem to get myself quite clear of it. And always, at the approach of the hospital, my body quivers. That thinly disguised assembly line of professionals! The intern's smile is not from the same face as her eyes. The gaudy false cheer of poinsettias. The otherworldly light. I inevitably share a room with someone who groans sporadically through the night, or with someone who keeps the TV on at full volume, or with someone who stays silent and hidden (all the more menacingly) behind privacy curtains, and usually with all three of them. And I am the worst of us: bitter to be there, exuding contempt for my roommates for their smallest, most unconscious gestures, constantly glancing toward the 8<sup>th</sup> floor window with sthenic desperation in my face... The two with their privacy curtains open form a subtle alliance with the one hidden away, but I'm too panicky for human sympathy, incapable of closing my eyes, inwardly howling for the nurse to medicine me to sleep.

From the moment the hospital sucks me in through its jolting automatic door, I feel I've been delivered not into the house of repair, not into the hive to which I truly owe my life among petals, but into the maw of melancholy. The walls of the hall expand and contract. All that gleaming whiteness, the starched and turned-down sheets, the nurses in their uniforms, the antiseptic linoleum floors, the lights blaring their scurrile phosphorescent buzz all over the pale ceiling. In my thin gown, I feel like something limp and green wedged between monstrous molars.

And it's not that I fear the reminder of my mortality. I love cemeteries. In fact, by peculiar happenstance, I've always lived beside a cemetery. I know the man who comes and talks earnestly to a stone every Saturday. I know the man who sandblasts names onto new monuments. The art of stonecutting belongs to another time. When our son was little and his poor ill beagle, Karl Barx, died and in a distraction we left the body with the vet to be cremated, we told our boy, so that he might have a sense of closure, that we had buried Karl next door in the cemetery. All by himself, he zeroed in on the stone nearest our house, Charley Lee Rogers, and when he was sad, he would storm into the cemetery and fling himself on that stone and declare to worried strangers, sweeping dirt or placing wreaths on the neighboring graves of their loved ones, that his dog was buried in this spot.

So probably a geologist. Not a selfless fucking doctor.

*Homage to Translation: Mexico*

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I approach the self-obliterating ecstasy of translation with trepidation. The more so because my own language derives from a Europe whose history of military and economic conquests deprived so many other cultures of their indigenous languages.

I may hope that my own translations are less colonial raids into other languages than subversions of English, injections of new poetic forms, ideas, images, and rhythms into the muscular arm of the language of power, but I know they are both.

One upshot of the fifth century “barbarian” invasions was the measured shift from Greco-Roman to Christian art. During the Renaissance, a strong Byzantine influence helped direct the transition from Christian to European styles. And it was contact with Oceanic and African sculpture that provoked, in part, the leap from European to Modernist art.

I look to translations to refresh American English.

When I myself translate, I work to introduce into American English some of the essential and distinctive qualities of the language from which I'm translating. Not only its image repertoire and subject matter, but the sequencing of its sounds, the rhythmic pulse, the distinctive syntax, and more subtle suggestions of resonant relations. In a good translation, the original may be veiled, but it doesn't disappear.

The maverick Progressive Era writer Mary Austin became convinced that environmental rhythmic patterns are translated into the physiology of people attuned to them. So the prosody of the Gettysburg Address, as she reads it, expresses the rhythms of a man who spent many hours splitting rails.

When children die in rural pueblos in Mexico, they are sometimes buried with silk handkerchiefs over their faces. It is thought that worms, respecting silk because it is a part of them, will refrain from eating a child's face.

When I translate Mexican poet Pura López Colomé, I try to make a line that is equally flexible and propulsive, one that might accommodate the architecture of successive clauses that modify perceptions in process, actively, without dragging, so that when a sentence ends, the lineal arrangement and the syntax and the rhythm all conspire to draw the reader forward. This is part of the contour and momentum that I feel in her poems in Spanish.

I am not above inventing rhyme or wordplay in translation where there is none in the original in order to make up for wordplay or rhyme that is lost elsewhere. But a translator can justify such “recoveries” only as acts of faith, by translating not individual words, but the poem as a whole.

Chaucer’s attention to the rhythm of the French alexandrine surely inspired his own shift of convention from tetrameter to pentameter verse lines.

Emily D, #842: The Fox fits the Hound—

As a translator, I try to make something equivalent, not equal.

Petrarch, himself a translator as well as a poet, observed that what the translator writes should be (in Nicholas Kilmer's version) "similar, but not the very same; and the similarity, moreover, should be not like that of a painting or statue to the person represented, but rather like that of a son to a father, where there is a shadowy something—akin to what painters call one's air—hovering about the face, and especially in the eyes, out of which there grows a likeness that immediately, upon our beholding the child, calls the father up before us."

The thoughts that are expressed to me by music that I love, wrote Felix Mendelsohn, are not too indefinite to be translated into words, but on the contrary too definite.

In an oversized notebook, Picasso translated the poems of Gongora into *remarques*, figural embellishments across the page and in the margins of the poems.

Even mistranslations have spurred significant developments. The supposedly newly-discovered poems of 3<sup>rd</sup> century warrior-poet Ossian—in translations forged by Scot prankster-poet James MacPherson—fueled Joseph Herder's Romantic re-conception of German identity.

And like Herder, the American poet Ezra Pound helped launch a new literary movement stimulated, in part, by translations based on a mistaken interpretation of the nature of the Chinese ideogram.

In contemporary Mexican poet Pura López Colomé's art, wordplay is an integral part of the intended meanings of the poems. When she writes, in "Los Cachorros" ("The Cubs"):

Siluetas que se arrastran  
por el mármol,  
el mar del mal,  
la mía entre ellas

--the words might be translated to stress semantic meaning as:

Silhouettes that drag themselves  
through the marble,  
the sea of evil,  
my own among others.

The colors of Giotto's painted mountains are derived from crushed stones excavated from those very mountains. Just so in translation: words are obliterated to allow for new words suggestive of more and less than the original meanings.

But what would be lost in a literal translation of Lopez-Colome's lines is essential to the poem in Spanish. In English, we lose the rich sounds in Spanish, the repeating r's, m's, and l's. Even worse, the deformation of *mármol* into its constituent near-phonemes, *mar* and *mal*, introduces a Kabbalistic inquiry, one which is central to Pura López Colomé's poetic project, one which links the sounds and spellings of words to orbits of mystical, moral, and spiritually-and-imaginatively transformative possibilities.

Frederiche Holderlin rendered an entirely literal translation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, word for word. And Louis Zukofsky translated classical Greek poems homophonically (though not regardless of literal meaning).

In 1944, prior to "D Day," the BBC broadcast to French Resistance fighters a code based on a phrase from Paul Verlaine's poem, "Chanson d'Automne." The first line, translated as "The long sobs of the violins of autumn," meant that a British and U.S. invasion was imminent. On June 5<sup>th</sup>, a phrase from the second stanza, "Wound my heart with a monotonous languor" forewarned the French Resistance fighters of the Normandy invasion, allowing them to initiate their own attacks.

In my translation of Lopez-Colome, I chose to alter the literal meaning in order to stress an equivalent degree of linguistic play and complication. I translated the lines as

Silhouettes dragged  
through granite hills,  
grey-nets of hell,  
mine among them.

But perhaps this is better:

Silhouettes that drag themselves  
across the limestone,  
all the lies intoned,  
and mine among them.

Are you aware that the glow generated by light-producing organs on the undersides of some fish acts to countershade them, erasing the shadow cast when they are viewed from below against the lighted water above?

Just so, the translator must disappear.

Plutarch's translation of an epigraph on a statue of Isis: "No mortal hath lifted my veil."

Lopez-Colome co-edits a literary magazine called *Gato por Liebre*. Cat for Rabbit. You ask for a rabbit (to cook), but they give you a skinned alley-cat instead. How would you translate that into English?

There's an old blues refrain: *I begged for water, you gave me gasoline.*

The translator, veiled with the imagined music of the writer's mind, allows herself to be led away from a world familiar by consensus. For her journey is nothing less than a burial in that silence in which words were begotten. Only at the other side of that silence can the translator remove her veil to find the translation, naked and pewing... born again.

*Cunt*: from queynte, aka bele chose, “lovely thing”.

Surely John Ashbery is referring to the meeting between author and translator when he writes, “In the presence of both, each mistook/ The other’s sincerity for an elaborate plot.”

*Ligature*

When the strong drag of the boy's adolescence pulls through them, the family rises into thinness and begins to break like a wave.

You turned away when I kissed you, the woman says. Why?

Half-lidded days of early winter.

When he points toward the woman, the boy looks at his hand the way dogs will.

The boy's jaw sets. As though behind his teeth, into the soft flesh of his throat, a new set of teeth were cutting through. A mouth for what?

Each of them adopts a private view. Arguments veer every which way, and who can follow? A sequence of dark non-sequiturs blows in.

When one, when one word, when the word suicide enters the room where they are shouting, the system closes down, prematurely becalmed.

The man writes, I am not given a subject but am given to my subject. I am inside it like a parasite.

He sees the woman's face contract at the approach of other futures than the one for which her face was prepared.

So they inhabit their bodies like music for a given time. And yet he continues to act as if there were times to come.

I just want you to go away, one of them screams.

Expressionless and flat as a tortilla, the afternoon moon over their house.

She calls the man to a corner in the basement. Those aren't spider eggs, he says, backing up.  
Those are its eyes.

When the encounter with the self is volcanic, nothing can follow.

Tearing open the cocoon to reveal itself, a boy within the family.

As if they were waiting. As if inside experience, bright with meaning, there were another  
experience pendant, unnameable.

## Ligature 2

I'm afraid you have mistaken my intent, I do not say to her. And so we will not speak to each other again.

Small dog barking "like it wants something." But the birds are not singing like they want something.

Early moon, an illuminated fetus.

That deep, intimate smell of a child in sickness, I mean to say: the fusion of fever, skin, hair, and sweat at the neck. But my translation is so slow, my auditors take *child* and *smell* and begin to - interject: *the smell of Calomine when he had chicken pocks, the smell of the baby's breath after nursing ....*

Requisite tequila shots. The face looking back haggard, lined.

The human ear appears most sensitive to the sound of keening. So that birds seem to vocalize the grief of trees?

A dog on the rooftop, her teats black and long, checks out the boy who walks ahead of us and on the opposite side of the street.

Her come-hither finger curl auditions his response.

As we pass the beggar slouched against the wall with his palm open on his knee, is it still sky of skies or skies of sky?

To watch, in the woman's eyes, the sinking Plimsoll line of her despair.

At the hotel, sunburned and disconsolado, the boy immelmaning across the pool for an hour.

**I remember dreaming last night that he loved me.**

*Ligature 3*

One hairy woodpecker follows another around the trunk.

Word as sap, I scrawled. As soon as possible.

Waiting for the boy, a gangly pup lolls at the edge of the plaza. Rolls onto its back, attacks a scrap of napkin.

From our table, I watch the woman's eyes shuffle the faces of passersby. Her earrings have stretched the holes in her lobes into suggestive slits.

When we first met, the words we whispered were erotic. Later it was the silence.

A stranger asks me to accompany her son to the men's room. He has an eagerness to pees, she translates.

Humility is pride's strictest flourish, its grass script. But to submit to the world is integration, the beginning of—

The boy picks a leaf to lay beside the rhinoceros beetle flailing on its back. The beetle rights itself against the leaf. Meanwhile the twig begins to bleed.

All the while we sit jostled against each other on the crowded bus, angry and unspeaking, an electrostatic charge joins the fine hairs of our legs.

When he doesn't come home, I search for him. Under the streetlamp, a dust-colored scorpion, hatchlings riding her, raises her pedipalps.

Haunted town. In the predawn, muffled breakers. Roosters. A cat slowly eases itself into a garbage can.

Without language, appearance still asks questions of itself.

He has been photographing pariah dogs. You must be inside pain to feel it.

I wake to hear a woman outside the window pishing warblers.

The boy points out to me a cartography of snail tracks on a broad avocado leaf.

Not the sentence is for the words but the words are for the sentence. Two of us withdraw to make room for the third.

A parrot walks from the table onto the boy's outstretched hand. He picks it up before he sees the half of its wing shorn cleanly as with a scissor.

## Ligature 4

The bioluminescent undersides of squid render them invisible to predators below. That the radiance of the boy's anger might protect him.

Walking the dog and stepping on a patch of repaired road, I remember the soft spot in his head.

You're deaf as a beagle. No, you are.

Can I feel the tide's drag on the turning earth increase each day's duration?

A hair in my nostril has gone white.

In absolute night from my bed, I hear him aiming for the toilet's center. The sound deepens, voice finding its register.

Scientists call it an entangled system.

We survive Christmas, his face pressed to the smooshed bosom of his grandmother in a house so immaculate, the spider in the seam of the ceiling stands out obscenely.

Like a star at the outskirts of the galaxy, and slung around by the gravity of dark matter. For now, he goes where we go, but he does not belong to us.

I begin to begin my sentences leaning toward him, taking a deep breath. He relinquishes the conversation with a contraction of his pupils.

What is for one of us the throb of the immediate is, for the other, the imminent mundane.

When napalm hits my brain, he takes on the tranquillity of a blinking newt.

She finds a photograph of him at seven. The sheer *expressed* of his face. As among Michelangelo's early drawings, there is a copy of Massaccio's lost Sagra, *the consecration*.

We search our memories of him for a certain unity of characteristics that would hold through the permutations he now submits to us.

When it clings to the wire-and-rug surrogate, lab technicians shock it again. Instead of releasing, it clings tighter.

Throwing himself into the back seat after wrestling practice, mat burns on his cheek and forehead.

His muteness an onomatopoeia of the rising moon.

Coral Bracho

From *That Space, That Garden*

II.

*I hear your voice: feel it folding into the mix,  
igniting. Something  
you said then,  
in any case,*

*in any case that always comes to pass; comes and flourishes  
like ivy, like a forest,  
like luminous  
sand.*

\*

What is it that jars my life in the strut  
of that voice?  
What is so touching in its lacquered depths  
and within the whisper  
of its dark cascade?           *Water*

*of fluid light.     Water  
of stud-frame reliefs.*

*--That on its shores the shadows stretch out and dampen,  
that across its watershed they bloom. That in its golden net*

*like an ancestral offering they disperse themselves  
and there they begin, and there deposit their seed.*

*That before the limitless umbrae,  
where the urns and the rocks  
settle, rain kindles  
its cadence.*

*Let it be  
that between the sparkling  
and between the fine grains of the mirror  
darkness falls.*

\*

Is night the place  
that illumines memory.

It's an enormous structure  
over the sea. Is its unfolding

and its sequence.

Endless walkways extend over white pillars.

The open terraces toss shadows on the waves,  
and one turns inward and crosses  
unfathomed realms.

The gaze begins inaugurating outlines,  
the footsteps begin centering the vastness.

And the shifting  
lines of its profile tangle.

And its solidity, encountered,  
begins to instill in us a clarity: space  
interlaced with itself. We see  
transparency in the walls, transparency in the dense,  
wakeful waves and a happiness grazes us like an augury,  
like the delicate and discrete fin  
of a fish.

Coral Bracho  
New Poems

*Turbulent its fluid calm*

Center,  
capsized breath:  
this sea that opens us,  
takes us in. Its gentle  
drift; vast, complete transparency, inundating us  
its burnt metal; turbulent  
its fluid calm. Aureous current let loose, intoxicated volumes --Sensed  
its swathing density very like a lightness:

With the weightlessness of snow  
it alights,  
the gull on the rocks.

With an eruption of wind it lifts  
over the swell  
its unlocked sun, like a tangled chord unraveling  
in a dark garden: Knots that give off light  
and come undone.  
Hoops that intensify their deep-rooted amplitude.  
Wefts that tie off  
and tease out in shadows their woven flame. Ciphered, spilled channel,  
overflowing cadence. Touching  
the water's edge, the burning sand,  
leaving its ephemeral trace,  
its bottomless thirst.

And this rock that invites the quiet of the night,  
that pulls us on and guides us by it.

Star. Impulse that radiates,  
concentrates.

That we bear in our hands like an end.

Like a close-fitting amulet.

Fire that conjoins  
and discerns.

--Knowing that it conceives and its effusive conflagration.

Stag that inaugurates the thicket.

Sun that engenders and plots out the darkness.

Vestige,

nocturnal light that delineates and decants us; that buries  
and bewilders us. That prompts us to see.

Coral Bracho

From *Ese espacio, ese jardín*

Translated by Forrest Gander

VI.

The white fox switches back below another plateau;  
her footfall lighting up the mountain. Laughter:  
a yellow that sings. Suns fused  
to the blue.

An arroyo flanked by flames,  
a swarm of light the murmur of poplars;  
a whisper of sand,  
of seeds.

The fox looks up, conceals herself; goes to snow.

Each sun seating itself in its whiteness leaves behind a silent sea,  
each shining coin,  
each leaf exact and rounded, a threshold,  
a shrouding silence.

\*

And what  
if the one who cuts through hedges;  
if the one who goes down  
and pauses at the sunken orifice of death  
is a boy?

And if that girl, coming back,

crosses the living room, the circle  
of appearance, of mourning --she,  
the one who sidesteps her own trace,  
her weight there,  
her tenebrous absence, bolting,  
turning and bolting in fits and starts through still furniture?  
She, in whom a deep shaft of tenderness intrudes  
setting off wellsprings and radicles, extensive orchards-- she enters  
shivering,  
the living room, and from there I glimpse her:  
A staircase of ice  
and what else?

\*

And what of that unfathomed grief,  
of that sea already drained, black  
among the borderless blackness? Something fictitious  
trembles, mocks itself within.

A chesspiece; a perimeter.

A breathing fissure, there.

A fake grappling hook:

and so its absurdity, its persistence,  
its abject display. Stirred up  
and deceptive,

it is pure emptiness: Nothing  
that could wake from it.

Only arrogance.

Only its oblique mistake.

Imperturbable.

An instant!

an instant isolated by the body's heat,  
its affectionate reach.

Only an instant  
in the eyes, the hands!

Hushed and tenacious, this emptiness,

  --Nothing, no one  
who could wake from it.

\*

The fox looks up,  
pauses.

Years, centuries, of seeing the snow. Of seeing silence  
on the mountain.

\*

And how, from that point,  
from that border line, that captured  
yelp, from that abrupt  
abandonment, might a realm extend?

A cool brilliance among the chrysanthemums. A word,  
a texture.

\*

All the weight,

the delirium, of rock, its vastness,  
transparentizes.

All the blazing reflux from the rock.

It is transient and cool silhouettes,  
the mountain; its light.

Slow cascade through the calm its channeled crystal.

Slow, lathed flame

its inner gesture contained:       Guardian

sea. A whole breathing

salvific.

Hot coals rivering and rising up

from another time,

beneath another rapture, other fissures.

All the stony washout of the clouds,

the coherence sundered.

\*

And how, from here, from that mirror

folding in on itself?

Other,

the animal gaze,

its mellow depths, its caress.   Time which radiates

into the leaves.