Although her poetry has not previously been translated into English, Matilde Casazola is one of Bolivia’s most prolific and popular living poets. Spirituality is a persistent theme in her work, as are the memory of childhood, the presence of the Bolivian landscape, and a bittersweet longing for lost loved ones. In Bolivia, Casazola is also a well-known composer, guitarist, and singer, and a strong lyrical and musical tendency is evident in her poems. Her songs, which are also poetic and embody the tenacious and timeless spirit of the Andes, have been recorded by many well-known artists from Bolivia and other Latin American countries.

Two key influences in Casazola’s poetry are Latin American romanticism and modernism, both robust and enduring literary currents in her home country. The passage of time as anguish and loss is the most persistent theme in her work, and related to it are others — the landscape as a source of enthusiasm and vitality, and an overpowering nostalgia for departed loved ones, youth, and innocence.

The four poems that follow are from A veces, un poco de sol (1978). The first is dominated by childhood memories of loss and of guilt for not maintaining intense bonds with an eccentric and loving older relative, a great uncle. The style here is simple and straightforward. As in many of Casazola’s poems, death, like life, is a solitary journey, a passage. The old uncle, who “wanders time’s streets” and seems to possess secrets of the cosmos, “the names of the stars,” passes to “the other side.” When finally “his old sun” goes out, “we,” the children, “were very far away,” unable to accompany him at the final hour.

The second poem, titled only “Poem 56,” is, in effect, a poetics, a tentative declaration of independence from the precious and elaborate canons of a tenacious Latin American modernism and an affirmation of a more elemental, intense, and personal style in which...
the poet prefers “to write with worms and roots and falling waters.” She rejects both self-absorbed, hermetic verse (“mirrors”) and, at least for the moment, her existentialist preoccupation with life as a journey (“streets”) in favor of the tangible, almost erotic relationship between the body and its natural environment, “the diffuse light that penetrates our pores” and brings about communion and fulfillment.

“Rib Cages” is a more direct example of this insistent preoccupation with the body. The poet sets up a dialectic between the secret unbridled “fandango” of the wildly beating hearts and the external circumstance in which the individuals find themselves, some sort of nocturnal political meeting related to wages and possible strikes, a commonplace event for both ideologically engaged intellectuals and struggling workers in Bolivia. Here, as in the first poem, the world of these seemingly mundane events is linked to cosmic forces, as “the planets watch their calendar whirl.”

The harsh character of proletarian life is still more explicit in “The Miner,” in which the Bolivian miner, despite—or perhaps precisely because of—his extreme circumstances, also appears as a cosmic presence, even a deity, “whose eyes are metallic stars” and who, together with the earth itself, is consumed in a sacrificial rite in the name of economic development, of the construction of “resplendent cities.” His descent into the mine represents another epic journey, but this time a ritualistic daily one, to that same “other side” of life, where he must confront “the damp walls” that “lick your body with sinister tongues” and then recreate himself in the Dionysian ritual of drink before descending into the earth once again.

In all these poems then, suffering and loss combine with desire for recuperation of lost happiness and redemption in an almost mystical state of grace of union with the Other. Yet the simple, transparent, and forceful images that communicate these sentiments speak to people of varied social classes and levels of education.
Poema II para el tío Germán
(de La noche abrupta)

a Germán Mendoza

El hermano de nuestro abuelo
se murió.
Él sabía el nombre de los astros,
él, con su sombrero gacho.

El tío Germán
se perdió
con pasito menudo por las calles
del tiempo,
él con su bastón y con su abrigo viejo.

El tío Germán dobló
la esquina y nos miró
pero no estábamos.

El viejo tío huraño
de cabellos al viento
y largas uñas de profeta
o ermitaño,
que sabía de memoria libros enteros,
caminador empedernido,
filósofo picante y medio áspero,
no se levantó más.

Sus ojos se asomaron al otro lado
y susurró “me voy”,
y fue apagando
dulcemente
su viejo sol.

El tío Germán
El otro abuelo,
Se murió la otra noche
Y nosotros estábamos muy lejos.

Poem II for Uncle Germán
(from Abrupt Night)

for Germán Mendoza

Our grandfather’s brother
has died.
He knew the name of the stars,
he with his slouch-brim hat.

Uncle Germán
wandered
time’s streets
with short, quick steps.
He with his cane and his old coat.

Uncle Germán turned
the corner and looked at us,
but we weren’t there.

Our old taciturn uncle
with his wind-tossed hair
and his long fingernails of a prophet
or a hermit,
who knew whole books by heart.
This obsessive walker,
this caustic and gruff philosopher,
did not get up again.

His eyes looked out on the other side
and he whispered, “I’m going.”
And sweetly and slowly
his old sun
went out.

Uncle Germán,
our other grandfather,
died last night,
and we were very far away.
Poema 56 (de *A veces, un poco de sol*)

He escrito con encajes adherdos a las finas telas brillantes;

he escrito sobre mesas sólidas en piezas confortables donde la ventana está en su sitio y no hay que caminar mucho para encontrar un lápiz.

Ahora me gustaría escribir con gusanos y raíces y aguas despeñándose;

con el brillo furtivo de la arena sobre las piedras vírgenes.

Me gustaría escribir no de espejos ni de calles ni de angustias desmedidas poblando nuestra sangre

sino de la luz difusa que penetra en nuestros poros y transforma sabiamente las sustancias Invisibles, reservadas en el fondo de los cuencos mas secretos.

Poem 56 (from *Sometimes, a Bit of Sun*)

I’ve written with lace attached to fine brilliant fabrics.

I’ve written on sturdy tables in comfortable rooms where the window was where it should be and I didn’t have to walk far to find a pencil.

Now I like to write with worms and roots and falling waters, with the furtive shimmer of sand on virgin rocks.

I like to write not about mirrors nor streets nor exaggerated anguish that inhabits our blood

but about the diffuse light that penetrates our pores and craftily transforms the invisible substances reserved at the bottom of the most secret recesses.
Un poema elemental
y perfecto, como una almendra
de harinas insospechadas
premiándonos repentinamente;

An elemental poem,
perfect – like a surprisingly
tasty almond,
an unexpected reward for us.

Un poema recién vestido
con sobria túnica
sin costosos labrados
reiterados.

A poem newly dressed
in a sober tunic
without elaborate repeating
patterns.

Me gustaría escribir en la corteza
lechosa de la luz de luna, apoyando mi
mejilla
en su almohadón
fantástico;

I’d like to write on the milky
bark of moonlight, resting my cheek
on its fantastic
cushion.

escribir simplemente
con una sonrisa
que pregone la gracia
de existir.

Write simply,
with a smile
that proclaims the grace
of existing.
En las cajas torácicas
(Poema X de Los cuerpos)

En las cajas torácicas,
Los corazones golpean su fandango.
Están en plena farra,
ciegos de alcohol y lumbre.

Abren y cierran caudaloso párpado,
laten pañuelos rojos,
se regocijan en su salto.

Analfabetos
poderosos,
ignorantes del diario y el camino,
viven neuróticos por atrapar el tiempo y dispersarlo.

Soles de nuestro cuerpo,
relojes sumergibles y automáticos.
Dios gusta a veces
de sentarse a reposar en su triángulo.

Irresponsables de nuestra ruina
cada vez mas cercana,
saltimbanquis gloriosos
nos acompañan
como si nada hiciéran.

Este lunes a las once de la noche,
los corazones están locos,
nacen y mueren incontables veces
en sus cajas torácicas

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In Rib Cages
(Poem X from The Bodies)

In rib cages,
hearts pound out their fandango.
They are at the height of their binge,
blinded by alcohol and lights.

They open and close cautious eyelids,
their red scarves pulsate,
they rejoice in their leaps.

Powerful illiterates,
unaware of newspapers and roads,
they live neurotically,
trying to capture and scatter time.

Suns of our bodies,
automatic diving watches.
Sometimes it pleases God
to rest in state in your triangles.

Not accountable for our ruin
that each moment comes closer,
glorious acrobats
accompany us through life,
as if not doing much at all.

This Monday night at eleven,
the hearts are crazy mad.
They are born and die, over and over,
In their rib cages.
Nosotros, mansos, nos saludamos, esqueletos uniformes y abrigados.
Conversamos del hambre y atendemos negocios importantes.

Los corazones, no.
Enterrados en su cárcel estrecha, zapatean sollozan,
se regocijan en su salto.

¡Oh tambores que tanto resuenan este lunes a las once de la noche
todos los corazones convocados para pedir aumento de salario
o ir a la huelga!

Cuidado:
El mundo de los corazones es blindado.

Arriba, los planetas observan girar su calendario.

Ciegos de alcohol y lumbre,
golpean y golpean su fandango.

We gently greet one another, skeletons,
look-alikes, all bundled up.
We talk about hunger and deal with important business.

The hearts don’t.
Buried in their narrow jails
they stamp their feet and sob,
they rejoice in their leaps.

Oh drums that resonate this Monday night at eleven,
when hearts are called together to ask for a raise
or go on strike!

Beware!
The world of the hearts is armor-plated.

Above, the planets observe their calendar whirl.

Blinded by alcohol and lights,
they pound and pound out their fandango.
**Minero**
(Poema 44 de *Tierra de estatuas desteñidas*)

El sol de tu linterna
te ilumina los días
que noches son, adentro de la tierra.
Apiñado en la jaula,
con otros compañeros
bajas al fondo de la mina.
Las húmedas paredes
te lamen los contornos
como lenguas siniestras.

De la tiniebla extrae
tu sudor, la riqueza
que ávidas manos
blancas y pulidas,
negociarán mañana.

Y la tierra contigo
va envejeciendo
le duelen sus pulmones perforados.
Esplendorosas urbes se levantan
a costa de su sangre y de tu vida.

Tus ojos son metálicos luceros
que en el reflejo de tu vaso brillan.
¡Y todavía hay quién pregunta
por qué se emborrachan los mineros!

**Miner**
(Poem 44 from *Land of Faded Statues*)

Your headlamp’s sun
lights up your days
that are nights inside the earth.
Crammed in the cage
with your companions,
you descend to the mine floor.
The damp walls
lick your body
with sinister tongues.

Your sweat extracts
from the darkness
riches that avid hands,
white and polished,
will traffic in tomorrow.

And the earth like you
is aging,
its lungs cruelly perforated.
Resplendent cities arise
at the cost of its blood and your life.

Your eyes are metallic stars
whose gleam reflects in your glass.
And still some people ask
why the miners get drunk.