

Commentary and translation by Ben Van Wyke

M*archa por el desierto* (Wandering Through the Desert) has established the young poet, Sandra Santana, as one of the outstanding new voices of contemporary poetry in Spain, winning her praise from poets such as Aurora Luque, Martín Rodríguez-Gaona, and Francisco Brines. This is her first book-length collection of poems, and it is introduced with two epigraphs: one from the myth of Babel, in which God imposes confusion on humans through the creation of language diversity, and another from Heidegger, declaring that the dwelling-place of being is language. With this work, then, we are presented with a collection of poems that portray people in a condition marked by a confusion that stems from the absence of one fixed language, one that could serve as an extra-linguistic basis for meaning. At the same time, this condition depends on language as the place where meaning is created and resides. The titles of the three sections (“The Plagues,” “Wandering Through the Desert,” and “Construction of the Sanctuary”) connect these thirty poems to the Biblical Exodus at the same time that the poems themselves present us with an urban setting in which people attempt to satisfy their thirst to construct an oasis of stable meaning with words and objects that, in turn, refuse to remain stagnant. According to Aurora Luque, Santana’s poetry speaks “of how far away it is from its own borders; its words speak of the hunger that hunts down words; language speaks of its own thirst” (Máquina & Poesía, 21, 2002, my translation). These poems resonate well with some of the fundamental notions of language in contemporary philosophy, and provide an interesting site for reflecting on these ideas, though this is not to say that they must be read through the lenses of this type of theory. Written in the most quotidian language, and set in the most mundane of situations, they can be read in any number of ways, and, in fact, demand this multiplicity of readings, demonstrating their

own need to be created and appropriated by readers who will, in turn, give them expression, a need which also makes them perfect candidates for translation.

It is appropriate, then, that these poems have also found expression in several music projects both in Spanish and English (with the collaboration of the author and the translator respectively). The first section of the Spanish version, “Las Plagas,” was the subject of a composition for voice and electronic music by Miguel Álvarez Fernández in collaboration with Gregorio G. Karman, which had its debut at the Reina Sofía Art Museum in Madrid in 2003. Likewise, a selection of the English translations has been used in the electronic music compositions by the US-based group BigSphinx, which has performed them in several venues throughout 2005 and 2006.

Cerca de mi casa hubo una vía
para trenes enfermos
que pasaban, una vez por semana,
tosiendo y cojeando.

Allí, donde los días
eran como un enorme cilindro
de tela,
desenrollándose
hasta el horizonte,

los niños encontraban
piedras mudas
- de diversas formas y tamaños -
para decirse cosas estúpidas, que apenas
comprendían las pequeñas manos
al lanzarlas.

Pero este lenguaje
(el único tangible y fiable)
murió finalmente,
como un ratoncillo
distráido,
entre los raíles.

Near my house there was a track
for sick trains
that would pass once a week,
coughing and hobbling.

There, where the days
were like an enormous cylinder
of fabric,
unrolling itself
all the way to the horizon,

the children would find
mute stones
- of diverse forms and sizes -
to tell each other stupid things the small hands
hardly understood
when throwing them.

But this language
(the only one tangible and reliable)
died in the end
like a little mouse,
distracted,
between the rails.

Es terrible el pálido rostro de lo inmóvil. Por eso maquillamos con el color de los nombres cada una de nuestras muertes sucesivas:

“Una ventana, una puerta, un atril, una cama,
un espejo”

La poesía es la absurda vanidad que nos persigue bajo la tierra, el maquillaje que se pudre en las sepulturas.

Buscamos la verdad escarbando en la arena con cierta repugnancia: televisores, radios y teléfonos son sus fosas comunes. Algo nos dice, sin embargo, que duerme más allá del mar, arrojada bajo el cobijo del silencio; y si la señalamos con la voz despierta y huye, dejándonos todo su equipaje: nombres de objetos. Señales confusas de que algo pudo haber estado allí.

El recuerdo se convierte en una palabra de ocho letras, se rompe dejando escapar las imágenes como un gas a presión.

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Trazamos puentes invisibles hacia la reconfortante dureza de las formas. La ciudad es el reflejo de la naturaleza sobre la superficie curva de un cazo de aluminio: casas, templos y teatros fingen líneas rectas y simetrías ocultando en los límites su condición de tierra fértil e informe.

Sobre su superficie bidimensional vemos cómo los hombres comienzan temprano, cada mañana, a taladrar azulejos, y mujeres que humillan sus espaldas para esconder, bajo las mesas y entre los cojines, pequeños botones. Las semillas que calmen el llanto enfermo de sus hijos.

Pero con la puesta de sol todos lloramos, con vergüenza, la infinita tardanza del maná.

from Wandering through the Desert

The pale face of the inanimate is hideous. That's why we apply make-up the color of names to each of our successive deaths:

“A window, a door, a lectern, a bed,
a mirror”

Poetry is the absurd vanity that pursues us underground, the make-up that rots in tombs.

We search for truth digging through the dirt with certain repugnance: televisions, radios and telephones are its mass graves. But still, something tells us that it sleeps further out than the sea, wrapped up in the shelter of silence; and if we point to it with our voice it awakens and flees, leaving behind all its baggage: names of objects. Confusing signs that something might have been there.

Memory turns into a six-letter word, it bursts open letting images escape like pressurized gas.

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We sketch invisible bridges towards the comforting firmness of forms. The city is nature's reflection on the curved surface of an aluminum ladle: houses, temples and theaters feign straight lines and symmetries, hiding in their limits their condition of formless fertile earth.

Over its two-dimensional surface we see how men begin early, every morning, drilling holes in tiles, and women humiliate their backs hiding small buttons between cushions and under tables. The seeds that calm the afflicted crying of their children.

But with the sunset we all mourn, in shame, the infinite slowness of manna.

El fin de la jornada abre
estancias iluminadas
en la monotonía de los muros.

En la parada de autobús,
veo como los cuerpos se confunden
mientras la fatiga marca un ritmo,
apagado y frío,
sobre la pegadiza y tediosa
 canción de los rostros anónimos.

La fachada
contiene el caudal de lo interior.

El súbito ascenso
de una persiana descubre
un guiño
hacia la cara oculta
de terrazas y ventanas.

The close of the workday opens
illuminated dwellings
in the monotony of walls.

At the bus stop,
I see how bodies jumble together
while fatigue marks a cold,
muted rhythm
over the catchy and tedious
 song of anonymous faces.

The façade
contains the flow of the interior.

The sudden ascent
of some blinds uncovers
a wink
towards the hidden face
of balconies and windows.