

Carmen Calatayud

In the Company of Spirits



Eat Poems #18

Tracks

An Offering of Strength 01:50

Gaslight Hair 01:59

Low Rumble (For Michael Hughes, 1959-2011) 01:48

Moving to the Land of the Dead 01:45

Sweat for Venus 02:51

A Day in the Mayan Calendar 00:32

To My Father, Juan, Who Thought There Was a War to End All Wars. 02:42

New Sun (For Francisco X. Alarcón 1954-2016) 01:34

Transfiguration Between the Graves 01:59

Carmen Calatayud

“Poetry,” Robert Frost famously said, “is what gets lost in translation.” Frost had enough Latin and Greek (and maybe even enough German) to spot a bad translation from those languages, but he never produced, as far as I know, any translations of poetry himself. Frost was, of course, born an English-speaker in an English-speaking culture and lived all his life, except for a few years spent in England, in his own country. Thus, he never experienced the necessity as many people do experience to have to translate not only from one language to another, but from one culture, one country, one identity to another. For most of those people, translation and all that is lost with it is inevitable. But there may be poetry to be had in that necessity to translate after all.

Carmen Calatayud was born to an Irish mother and a Spanish father (he was from Valencia, Spain). As a young child, she spoke both Spanish and English at home, and grew up among Spanish-speakers from a number of nationalities. In her poetry, a minimalist’s use of Spanish stands in for the liminal spaces she is drawn to: in “Hermana in the Sky,” (“Sister in the Sky”) she attracts “tricksters *en mis sueños*,” (“tricksters in my dreams”) and says to an absent sister, “*Haz la lucha conmigo*” (“Fight on by my side”). In other poems presented here, a single Spanish word (*mariposa, rioja*) signals another world present beyond the world happening in English. Calatayud translates that other world for us masterfully. Her poems find ways to express those things that happen not just in another language but in another sort of language altogether, inside the other, in the unknowns of a fragmentary past and a necessarily opaque future.

Another way to centralize what is in the margins is to transform (to translate) the marginal into the liminal, to take something at the edges and rephrase it (or translate it) as a border zone that must be crossed in order to change, to grow, to fully realize ourselves in the world. Or, rather, to transform ourselves in such a way that our world is also transformed. Calatayud performs such translations from the marginal into the liminal deftly. In “An Offering of Strength: For Those Who Cross the Border to Survive” this transit is made explicit:

The wounds of this world slip inside of
me and I am just a vehicle
for the United States of Pain

and later in the same poem:

The transformation tastes like ether but the
anesthesia fades, and the hour of breaking open
appears as clearly as a milky moon
on an early November night.

Here again we have the visible (“the milky moon”) embodying the invisible (“the hour of breaking open”) as the speaker is transformed and along with her, her world: the United States of America have now become “the United States of Pain.” In another poem, “Transfiguration Between the Graves,” Calatayud explores the crossing of a different sort of border:

I want to be part of the air that travels
between grave and sky,
that visits this city and brings flowers to it,
that filters the tired bones
above and below the ground.

The divide between those tired bones (her own above and those of the dead below) is here crossed by the air “that travels between grave and sky:” the speaker wants to become, and through the art of poetry does become, an airy spirit that can move between worlds and in so doing, unifies and transforms them.

It is thus not surprising that much of Calatayud’s poetry addresses what exists beyond our waking reality: it is a poetry of souls, of tricksters in dreams, of centuries yet to come, hell, God, saints, angels, prayers, ancestors, spirits, the dead. However, her poetry is also very much embodied in the real, and the juxtapositions (the crossings over, as it were) are breathtaking as they are illuminating: “I can’t scrape you from my soul,” she writes, and that single word choice (“scrape”) does the work of sentences; in the same poem, the speaker waits “for a gust of wind like you,” again embodying the heft and touch of a body in the bodiless heft and touch of an elemental presence.

Elsewhere, in an inspired leap of the imagination, Calatayud describes “[a] lifetime of summer afternoons / when lust was a sculpture of chiseled embrace.” One must stop and consider the impossibility of that image to appreciate its perfection. Over and over her poems manage to conjure and materialize what we often think of as the indescribable (the untranslatable, if you will): in a poem centered on Arlington Cemetery, the speaker wants to “feel the zero before I was born;” in another, the tangible and the intangible are again conjoined when “[in] another world, the helicopter that carries / your spirit lands next to the pyramids.”

That last quote comes from the poem “Low Rumble,” dedicated to a dead friend. The poem is also *addressed* to that friend, who, of course, cannot hear Calatayud’s words. Indeed, in these poems, Calatayud often addresses entities who are not capable of receiving nor understanding her communications: a dead sister (perhaps not literally) and whole cities (Nogales, Phoenix, Ciudad Juarez). And again and again she summons entities who exist only in the imagination and allows them to come to life on the page: the dead in general, mermaids, ancestors, God. It is as if by naming and addressing these entities Calatayud in effect brings them into being. It is an impossibility until it is done.

We imagine, Calatayud seems to be saying, not so much because we can make imaginary things real (ultimately, the dead remain dead and God remains silent in her poems) but because what happens in the imagination are the most important things of all. To put it another way: the distinction between what is real and what is not becomes

largely moot in Calatayud's work because she insists on pointing out how much of reality happens only in the mind. If, returning to Robert Frost, poetry is what gets lost in translation, must those for whom translation is inevitable (in all applications of the word) be lost too, to themselves or to others? Certainly poetry can't bring the dead fully to life, but to not attempt to do so in whatever limited ways it *can* do so is to give up on the possibilities of the attempt. We translate life into art, Calatayud may be saying, not because our efforts will be wholly successful but because the trying is what enriches us and gives our lives a fuller meaning. But more than that: Calatayud's work, ultimately, takes us to a place where experience, knowledge, and even poetry are not merely what can survive translation but that which in fact can not exist without it.

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