



RASTROJOS ~ *Rowena Hill*
Selected poems (1981-2019)

BILINGUAL EDITION

Foreword by Arturo Gutiérrez Plaza

A

Alliteration

RASTROJOS - SELECTED POEMS (1981-2019) | ROWENA HILL
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ROWENA HILL: PILGRIM AMONG LIVING REMAINS

Rowena Hill is a poet and translator born in England, who, after living for long periods in New Zealand and Italy, decided at the age of thirty-six to settle and put down roots in the city of Mérida and on a piece of land called “Los Rastrojos,” “Stubble Fields” (or “remains”), in the Venezuelan Andes. There she began to adopt Spanish as a language for poetry, and there she has spent by now most of her life, not counting the times she was living or wandering in different regions of India or traveling in other parts of Asia.

Delving into her poetry means entering a singular language: if, on the one hand, she finds in the body, as an enigmatic expression of life and death, a favored terrain for exploration, on the other, she herself becomes an embodied harvest of this Venezuelan earth where she was planted and has borne fruit under the protection and in the shadow of her native English. Although the six books that make up her poetic output consist of poems originally published in Spanish, in her own words:

I have never stopped writing also in English, and English has usually not been far away while I wrote in Spanish. Many times when a poem was born, in a phrase or image in one of the languages, it was followed by words in the other, I translated them reciprocally, and the poem went on growing

in both versions. Although one might escape the other and take over the poem, and in the end the two versions might not be the same. Usually I gave more importance to the Spanish, it developed more strength. I could say that for long periods English was the shadow language and Spanish was the light.¹

Not only does this poetry gravitate around nature and its impenetrable mysteries, but the very nature of this poetic language is also the result of a process of biological crossbreeding, of the mixing of different seeds and soils. Her own words confirm this idea: “I write in Spanish, maybe better in Venezuelan, since the words I have made mine are linked to this earth. At a deep level of mind, the earth where words are born, Spanish has been sown, has found the soil favorable, and flowers, bears fruits. Or, to use a different image, Spanish has become a mother tongue.”²

Entering into this poetry, then, means “discovering” poems that are the children of two mothers, two “mother tongues,” which live and have lived together in symbiosis, without displacing or denying each other, making the most of their respective heritages. In its way, this is a dialectical poetry, since, from its genesis, dialogue is inherent in it, unavoidable, consubstantial.

The six books that make up Rowena Hill’s poetic output are: *Celebraciones* (1981), *Ida y vuelta* (1987), *Legado de sombras* (1997), *No es tarde para alabar* (2012), *Planta baja del cerebro / Ground Floor of the Brain* (2012), and *Marea tardía / Late Tide* (2019). In this volume, the reader will find a selection of poems originally published in these books, arranged chronologically but without identifying their source. This decision reflects the desire to offer the reader who approaches the work for the first time a unified vision of the whole that reveals and emphasizes

¹ Rowena Hill, “Between Languages,” *Latin American Literature Today* 1, no. 15 (August 2020).

² Ibid.

the core aspects of this poetic venture, which has brewed over forty years.

Her work's consistency, however, stems from deeper sources. I think it is the inevitable result of the continuous and lasting exercise of lucidity in the face of the threat and the testimonies of the different kinds of collapse, endings, and desolation that besiege human existence and life in general on our planet and in our time, both in the collective sphere and in the individual microcosm. Faced with this unrelenting realization and sense of impending collapse, the poetic voice desires to find a space of communion with the sacred, with the root. The exploration of various geographical regions (Myanmar, Tibet, India, the Andean highlands, etc.) is part of this search. By contrast, on other occasions, the response is to cultivate irony or self-assurance as a way of bearing the harsh consequences of the passage of time and the inexorable traces it leaves behind: old age, bodily decline, decrepitude, and death. As a result, we find a particular wisdom in these poems in which the different ways of expressing the sacred are stripped of ingenuousness, in order to construct a gaze capable of preserving the primordial instant, resorting even to the cellars of the unconscious while still dismantling all kinds of imposture, including those that ritual practices themselves imply.

In these pages, the reader will find the voice of a woman who faces life day by day to celebrate it but also to make demands on it, to interrogate it, and to interrogate herself, a woman who lives and desires, in old age, too, and learns to live with the certainty that "[l]ife feeds on life" since "it was established so / by an ambivalent creator / his notion of balance," and that "[t]he heart revolts but knows / such fierce closeness / is a kind of love." The reader will converse with a female voice, endeavoring to find the divine in everything, but accustomed also to disillusionment, including the disillusionment generated by the political cynicism of recent decades in Venezuela, which has caused so much hunger and hardship. In this case, the poetic

voice rebels using sarcasm:

*crammed into lines
men and women wait
in the dirty street*

A false godling
fat and flabby
has condemned them to empty shelves
and a diet of lies.

The heart constricts
with pity
and shame stirs with anger
at their impotence.

In sum, in the series of scenes to which each poem in this book contributes, expectation, horror, and celebration configure ways of connecting to existence and to the world. The lesson is in attempting to link them comprehensively, in assimilating them to the evidence of the cycles of life and death in nature until the understanding is reached that it is in the integration and disintegration of the bodily in an earthly and cosmic whole that the truth of the sacred fundamentally resides.

Arturo Gutiérrez Plaza

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para Carlos Contramaestre

*La visión de la carne
desgarrada provoca
lesiones abrumadoras
en el tiempo del cuerpo.*

*Me he visto acercar
en la noche a la muerte
por marchitez, liviana
y polvorienta —*

*ella no es roja; la sangre
atraviesa como una pesada luz
el precario milagro
del vivir.*

for Carlos Contramaestre

The sight of mangled
flesh causes
abysmal lesions
in body's time.

I've seen approaching
in the night a withered
death, weightless
and dusty —

not red; but blood
runs like heavy light
through the precarious wonder
of living.

Tarde gris —

*los gestos de la ciudad, apaciguadores
en el aire estancado de hospital
entre carnicerías y escritorios
son cómplices del olvido;*

*en el valle la niebla
sube deshilachándose entre los árboles
y rocía las piedras — aquí
nadie busca un doctor;*

*y yo estoy entre
los dos, a punto de saber
que cielo e infierno son el mismo
lugar y todas las heridas
son por amor.*

Gray afternoon —

the city's gestures
placating in the stale hospital air
among butchers' shops and offices
abet forgetfulness;

in the valley mist
rises fraying among the trees
and dampens stones — here
no one is looking for a doctor;

and I'm between
the two, almost sure
heaven and hell are the same
place and all wounds
are for love.

*Hay dos muertes
de dolor: una
de mentiras, con la mano en el sexo
y la cara de santo mártir
fija sobre la paila
de los recuerdos putrescentes;
ésta abona
sólo los gusanos.*

*La otra ríe
y gime con el tiempo
hasta el fin, de luces
agudas como navajas;
la succión de la ausencia
la vuelve antorcha
que regala sus chispas
a los venideros.*

There are two deaths
from pain, one made of lies
with its hands on its sex
and a holy martyred face
fixed over the cauldron
of rotting memories.
This one serves only the worms.

The other laughs
and cries along with time
up to its end, from lights
as sharp as blades;
the vortex of absence
turns it into a torch
throwing off sparks
to the future.

*Vi sangrar y las manos
humedecerse en la carne;
las hojas frágiles
rojizas y los rojos hongos
ahora son harapos
de mi vientre, y el sol
derrama mi cerebro
en el monte.*

*Fue respuesta antes
del recuerdo, de la fisión
entre sí y no, centella
en la raíz de los nervios:*

*¿Era por estos velos
que en mi parto veía?*

*¿Hay luto por el despojo
mensual de la matriz?*

*Extinción dentro
de mi cuerpo, hermana
del espectro que codicia
la navaja y curaría de un golpe
el vértigo de mi equidistancia
entre nada y nada.*

I saw bleeding
and hands moist in meat;
the fragile rusty leaves
and red funguses have turned
into rags of my gut
and the sun spills my brain
over the hillside.

The response was before
memory, before the split
of yes and no; it flared
at the root of my nerves.

Did I see through these veils
as I was born?

Does the womb mourn each month
its desolation?

Extinction from inside
my body, sister of the specter
that covets the knife and would cure
with one blow
the vertigo of my equidistance
between nothing and nothing.

*La labor de destrucción
que procede detrás de mi sonrisa
se aproxima a un fin.*

*Pero ¿cuál es la muerte
que me acecha entre los biombos
de la intelección diaria?*

*¿Vejez, virus, voluntad
agotada en mí o en todos?
¿Es el Apocalipsis?*

*Cualquiera sea, no se mueve
en línea recta, afloran
entre las convicciones de destrozo*

*— las manos quemadas, el carro
rozando el borde del precipicio,
el reto de las sierras —*

*reuniones con la carne de la infancia:
la enormidad del árbol, la firmeza
del pecho de mi padre.*

The demolition work
going on behind my smile
is near its end.

But what death is it
stalking me behind the screens
of daily mentation?

Violence, old age, depletion
of will in me and everyone?
Is it the apocalypse?

Whatever it is, it doesn't move
in a straight line; among
the assurances of disaster

— burnt hands, wheels
grazing the edge of a precipice,
the challenge of a chain saw —

outcrops of childhood appear:
the immensity of a tree, the firmness
of my father's chest.

Beatrice

*Hermana, no quiero traspasar
la grama que te cubre,
la modesta piedra que te nombra
entre antepasados ajenos.*

*El oblicuo sol del norte
me mira y dice:
tan arriba está la luz,
tan abajo el silencio,
el momento entre los dos
rápido corre, el resto
no conoce ni luz ni silencio
y en los dos se pierde.*

*Discúlpame este dolor
que a ti no te toca.*

Beatrice

Sister, I don't want to pierce
the grass covering you
or the modest stone with your name
among others' ancestors.

The slanting northern sun
is watching me and saying:
as high above as is the light
so far below is the silence,
the moment between the two
passes quickly, the rest
knows neither light nor silence
it's lost in both.

Forgive me this hurt
that can't touch you.

El tránsito del rey

a la memoria de Arnaldo Acosta Bello

*... los años te alejaron
de las cosas hermanas, de los colores
y perfumes que ardían con tu llama azul,
sobre un océano de honduras monstruosas,
de tempestades déspotas y calma sin paz;*

*tras tuyo, las orillas se perdieron de vista,
frente a ti, ni asomo de tierra firme,
aquella avenida de chaguaramos que llevara
al jardín de rosas, la casita blanca,
tus libros y manuscritos iluminados,
los retratos de los amigos, vivos en las paredes.*

*Tuvo que ser el aire que te acogió,
el elemento menos tuyo se hizo denso
para recibir las huidizas huellas
de tu nuevo viaje.*

Passing of the King

Arnaldo Acosta Bello, in memoriam

...the years drove you away
from familiar things, from colors
and scents that burned with your blue flame,
over an ocean of enormous depths,
shattering storms and calm without peace;

behind you, shores were lost to sight,
in front, not even a glimpse of firm land,
that avenue of tall palms which would lead
to the rose garden, the white cottage,
your books and manuscripts, illuminated,
and friends' portraits alive on the walls.

It must have been the air that welcomed you,
the element that least belonged to you thickened
to receive the transient imprints
of your latest journey.