



A—N

I M P E R F E C T

G E O M E T R Y —

• *Elisa Díaz Castelo* •

Translated from the Spanish by Robin Myers
Foreword by Myriam Moscona

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Alliteration

AN IMPERFECT GEOMETRY | ELISA DÍAZ CASTELO

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THE VERTEBRAL ERRATUM AND OTHER CREDOS

I met Elisa Díaz Castelo in a seminar on Proust. It had been going on for years by the time she joined. The task of reading three thousand pages, the seven volumes of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, transpired over a preposterously long time: every Monday, for more than a decade, very slowly. The memorable, erudite coordinator of the seminar, Luz Aurora Pimentel, saw this study circle as a train that passengers could board and exit at different stations. The train stayed its course, chugging steadily along, allowing people to get on and off as they wished. It was maybe the seventh year when a young new face appeared onboard. She said little, but when she did speak up, her comments were marvelously fresh and perceptive. I didn't know much about her, but we had a natural, fluid connection. Not long after that, I learned that she wrote and translated poetry, had lived for several years in the United States, and had won an international poetry contest during her time there. One afternoon, she asked if she could show me her first book. I agreed, more out of fondness than admiration.

And that was the beginning of another story. I was astonished by those poems, which were mature in a way that a debut collection almost never is. We met up, and I offered a few suggestions. I remember that the first poem in what is now *Principia* appeared halfway through the book. I felt that this intensely

vigorous poem, “Scoliosis,” needed to open the collection. And she liked the idea. Then she shared her intention to submit the manuscript to a contest. I urged her not to, because I expected her to win it—better to aim for a more prestigious prize. She ignored my advice, and of course she won. It was her second book, *El reino de lo no lineal* (The kingdom of the nonlinear), that received the Aguascalientes Fine Arts Award, Mexico’s most venerable poetry prize. When I heard the title for the first time, I thought it successfully metaphorized the kingdom of poetry itself, which is rarely linear—and when it is, no matter how powerful it may be, such poetry withers after a few reads. Quite the opposite of what happens in Díaz Castelo’s book, which ebbs and flows in confrontation with life and death. *El reino* isn’t an imitation of *Principia*, nor is it a space where poetry and science return to their previous pairing. And yet *Principia* is still part of it, transformed. After all, her first book already set the cardinal points of her explorations: some thematic, some rhythmic.

Principia is the pain of splintered bones, in fractures, in dislocations. The “vertebral erratum,” as she calls this pain, makes her spine rebuke her—but she, the lyric voice, has no answers. The poems in *An Imperfect Geometry*, which you hold in your hands, remark on this and other revelations. As the voice leaves itself to observe the world—reaching out with the subtle touch of the unsighted, discovering things by their shape and temperature—science exposes it to the imperceptible realm. The visible is just a fragment of reality, as Paul Klee would say. Díaz Castelo’s poems are laced with death, with “scavenging” life after death. Immediately thereafter, she offers us a death certificate. It’s all connected. The cells of her enviable olfactory and rhythmic perception explode into another arrangement on the page. There’s nothing banal about the shift. It’s a death certificate. “Inside your body it was outside now.”

Previously, in her poem “Credo,” Díaz Castelo had put forth another kind of cartography. There, in constellation, are the subjects that plant her in fertile ground: everyday objects,

attention to others (“I believe in other people’s pain”), the fanning out of her passionate curiosity about scientific knowledge (Elisa is the daughter of two doctors, and I imagine she was exposed to other vocabularies as a child). Here, in this “Credo,” we find the periodic table, thermodynamics, the life of a cell (with “its membranes, nuclei, and organelles”); here is the invisible and the miniscule (electrons, protons, even quarks); here, too, is a metaphysical exploration of the connections between science and faith in God. This poem isn’t a poetics; it’s the future map of her world touching first base. That is, it’s the title, *Principia*, which plays with three different meanings: Newton’s *Principia Mathematica*; a subversion of the gendered noun “principio” in Spanish, thus signaling a feminine principle; and the insinuation, winking at the reader, that creation starts here—for in *Principia* there is the Word.

Whom do we find in the hidden layers of her speech? There are echoes and playful rewritings of Octavio Paz and Vicente Huidobro, but also the influence of Wisława Szymborska—and, farther back, of Sor Juana, who shares Díaz Castelo’s interest in science and its nomenclatures. US poetry also reveals its mark when the conversational register turns inward. And her work is indebted to Greek tragedy and its choral structure, which breaks down the epic into voices. This is particularly the case of the complex *Proyecto Manhattan* (The Manhattan Project), Díaz Castelo’s third book, written in the form of a script about the creation of the atomic bomb. Here, women’s voices don’t inhabit the periphery but take center stage. There’s one line from this book that I take as a declaration: “There isn’t time to say everything. / All of time can’t fit in this space.” And this, in counterpoint, leads me back to Proust, the memorialist who wanted to say everything, the god of details who once captivated Díaz Castelo as a young poet. I remember being struck by her sensitivity as a reader, enthralled as she was by the author who saw his whole body of work as a cathedral full of connections and symmetries, a poetics of intermittency.

Elisa Díaz Castelo has the kind of talent that only comes around every thirty years. Anything can happen: she could stop writing, she could explore different registers, pursue different genres. There's no way to know. But what she has written so far has already secured her a place in the history of Mexican literature, and her name is already written there, her echo traveling back. We hear the future in the past, which is simply the moment I choose to place a period at the end of this sentence—but not, I hope, a full stop in my own contact with her poems.

Myriam Moscona

A — N

I M P E R F E C T

G E O M E T R Y —

DE PRINCIPIA

TIERRA ADENTRO, 2018

LILIPUTIENSES, 2020

ELEFANTA, 2021

FROM *PRINCIPIA*

TIERRA ADENTRO, 2018

LILIPUTIENSES, 2020

ELEFANTA, 2021

Escoliosis

*En la búsqueda de la forma,
se me distrajo el cuerpo. Es eso,
nada más, asimetría.*

*La errata vertebral,
el calibrado óseo,
la rotación espinada. Es el hueso
mal conjugado.*

*Es una forma de decir
que a los doce años
ya se ha cansado el cuerpo.*

*Es la puntería errada de mis huesos,
la desviada flecha.*

*No es lo que debiera, mi esqueleto
quiso escapar un poco
de sí mismo. Se le dice escoliosis
a esa migración de vértebras,
a estos goznes mal nacidos,
hueso ambiguo.*

*A esa espina
dorsal
bien enterrada.*

*A los doce años se me desdijo el cuerpo.
Porque árbol que crece torcido, nunca.
Porque mis huesos desconocen
el alivio
de la línea,
su perfección geométrica.*

*Me creció adentro una curva,
onda,
giro*

Scoliosis

In search of form,
my body grew distracted. That's what it is
and nothing more: asymmetry.
The vertebral erratum,
the osseus calibration,
rotation wreathed in thorns. It's bone
misconjugated.
It's another way to say
that by age twelve
the body is exhausted.
It's my bones' imperfect aim,
the deflected arrow.
It isn't as it should. My skeleton
longed to flee a little
from itself. We call it scoliosis,
this vertebral migration,
adulterated hinges,
ambiguous bone.
This well-
buried
spine.

At twelve, my body unspoke itself.
Because a tree that grows distorted, never.
Because my bones don't know
the succor
of a line,
its geometric perfection.

A curve burgeoned in me,
a wave,
a shift

*de retorcido nombre: escoliosis.
Como si a la mitad del crecimiento
dijera de pronto el cuerpo mejor no,
obvídalo, quiero crecer para abajo,
hacia la tierra. Como si en mi esqueleto
me dudara la vida, asimétrica,
desfasada de anclas o caderas,
mascarón desviado, recalante.*

*Mi columna esboza una pregunta blanca
que no sé responder. Y en esta parábola de hueso.
De esta pendiente equivocada. De lo que creció
chueco, de lado, para adentro.
Se me desfasan
el alma
y los rincones. Mi cuerpo:
perfectamente alineado desde entonces
con el deseo de morir y de seguir viviendo.*

*Si las vértebras, si la osamenta quiere, se desvive,
rota por no dejar el suelo. Si se quiere volver
o se retorna, retoño dulce de la tierra rancia,
deseo aberrante de dejar de nacer
pronto, de pronto, con la malnacida duda
esbozada en bajo la piel, reptante.
Paralelamente. No es eso
no es
eso
no
eso no,
no es ahí, donde ahí acaba,
donde empieza el dolor empieza el cuerpo.*

*Si se duele, si tiembla, al acostarse
un dolor con sordina, un daltónico dolor vago,*

of twisted name: scoliosis.
As if, mid-flourishing,
my body stopped and said I take it back,
forget it, I want to grow the other way,
into the earth. As if, inside my skeleton,
my life were doubting, asymmetrical,
de-synced from hips or anchors,
disjointed figurehead, taking on water.

My backbone sketches a blank inquiry
I don't know how to answer. And in this parabola of bone.
Of unsound slope. Of what grew
crooked, sideways, inward.

My soul
and corners jostle out of step. My body:
so perfectly aligned since then
with the wish to die and to keep living.

If vertebrae, if bones so choose, there is a dying-to,
shattered by not leaving the ground. If there's the longing to turn back,
if the return, the tender sprouting up from rancid earth,
aberrant lust to stop being born
so soon, abruptly, with the grim doubt
outlined under the skin, aslither.
In parallel. That's not it
that's not
that's
not
it,
not there, right where it ends,
where pain begins, so does the body.

If it hurts, if it trembles, a muffled pain
when lying down, a vague ache, colorblind,

*si el agua tibia y la natación, si la faja
como hueso externo, cuerpo volteado,
si los factores de riesgo y el desuso,
si el deslave de huesos. Es minúsculo
el grado de equivocación, cuyo ángulo.
A los doce años se me desdijo el cuerpo,
lo que era tronco quiso ser raíz.
Es eso, el cuarto menguante,
la palabra espina, la otra que se curva
al fondo: escoliosis. Es el cuerpo
que me ha dicho que no.*

if warm water and swimming, if the bind
like an external bone, bone overturned,
if the risk factors and disuse,
if the landslide of bones. It's miniscule,
the margin of error, whose angle.
At twelve, my body unspoke itself,
and what was trunk yearned to be root.
That's it, the waning crescent,
the thorn-word, the other word that curves
into the depths: scoliosis. It's the body
that has told me no.

Credo

*Creo en los aviones, en las hormigas rojas,
en la azotea de los vecinos y en su ropa interior
que los domingos se mece, empapada,
de un hilo. Creo en los tinacos corpulentos,
negros, en el sol que los cala y en el agua
que no veo pero imagino, quieta, oscura,
calentándose.*

*Creo en lo que miro
en la ventana, en el vidrio
aunque sea transparente.*

*Creo que respiro porque en él pulsa
un puño de vapor. Creo
en la termodinámica, en los hombres
que se quedan a dormir y amanecen
tibios como piedras que han tomado el sol
toda la noche. Creo en los condones.*

*Creo en la geografía móvil de las sábanas
y en la piel que ocultan. Creo en los huesos
sólo porque a Santi se le rompió el húmero
y lo miré en su arrebato blanco, astillado
por el aire y la vista como un pez
fuera del agua. Creo en el dolor
ajeno. Creo en lo que no puedo
compartir. Creo en lo que no puedo
imaginar ni entiendo. En la distancia
entre la tierra y el sol o la edad del universo.*

*Creo en lo que no puedo ver:
creo en los ex novios,
en los microbios y en las microondas.*

*Creo firmemente
en los elementos de la tabla periódica,
con sus nombres de santos,*

Credo

I believe in planes, in red ants,
in the roof of my neighbors and their underwear
that flutters drenched on Sundays
from a thread. I believe in stout
black water tanks, the sunlight seeping into them,
and all the water I can't see but picture, dark and static,
heating up.

I believe in what I look at
through the window, and in glass,
crystal clear as it may be.

I believe I breathe because a fist
of steam hums there. I believe
in thermodynamics, in men
who stay the night and wake,
warm as stones left in the sun
for hours. I believe in condoms.

I believe in the mobile geography of sheets
and the skin they hide. I believe in bones
only because Santi broke his humerus
and I watched its white fit overtake him, splintered
by the air, gaze like a fish
wrenched out of water. I believe in other
people's pain. I believe in what I cannot
share. I believe in what

I can't imagine or decipher. In the distance
between the earth and sun, or the universe's age.

I believe in what I can't see:

I believe in ex-boyfriends,
microbes, and microwaves.

I firmly believe
in the elements of the periodic table,
in their saint's names,

*Cadmio, Estroncio, Galio,
en su peso y en el número exacto de sus electrones.
Creo en las estrellas porque insisten en constelarse
aunque quizá estén muertas.
Creo en el azar todopoderoso, en las cosas
que pasan por ninguna razón, a santo y seña.
Creo en la aspiradora descompuesta,
en las grietas de la pared, en la entropía
que lenta nos acaba. Creo
en la vida aprisionada de la célula,
en sus membranas, núcleos, y organelos.
Creo porque las he visto en diagramas,
planeta deforme partido en dos
con sus pequeñas vísceras expuestas.
Creo en las arrugas y en los antioxidantes.
Creo en la muerte a regañadientes,
sólo porque no vuelven los perdidos,
sólo porque se me han adelantado.
Creo en lo invisible, en lo diminuto,
en lo lejano. Creo en lo que me han dicho
aunque no sepa conocerlo. Creo
en las cuatro dimensiones, ¿o eran cinco?
Creí fervientemente en el átomo indivisible;
ahora creo que puede
romperse y creo en electrones y protones,
en neutrones imparciales y hasta en quarks.
Creo, porque hay pruebas
(que nunca llegaré a entender),
en cosas tan improbables e ilógicas
como la existencia de Dios.*

Cadmium, Strontium, Gallium,
their weight, their very number of electrons.
I believe in stars because they insist on shifting
into constellations even if they might be dead.
I believe in chance omnipotent, in things
that happen for no reason, to the letter.
I believe in the broken vacuum cleaner
and cracks in the wall, in entropy
that slowly does away with us. I believe
in the cell's imprisoned life,
its membranes, nuclei, and organelles.
I believe because I've seen them drawn in diagrams,
misshapen planet cleaved in two,
exposing tiny viscera.
I believe in wrinkles and in antioxidants.
I believe, reluctantly, in death,
only because the lost never come back,
only because they've run ahead of me.
I believe in what's invisible, and miniscule,
and far away. I believe in what I'm told
even if I can't see it for myself. I believe
in all four dimensions, or were there five?
I fervently believed in the indivisible atom;
now I believe it's capable
of breaking, and I believe in protons and electrons,
in impartial neutrons, even quarks.
I believe, because there's proof
(although I'll never understand it),
in things as improbable, illogical,
as the existence of God.

Oda a los ancestros

*No hablo del abuelo y su breve lozanía,
de sus manos ariscas, no hablo
de su longevo padre, ni de la tía solterona
que ordeñaba a las vacas,
ni de aquella cuya muerte a la mitad de otoño
interrumpió el cultivo de zarzas. Tengo
demasiados huesos en la boca. Hablo
de mis otros ancestros: Lucy, la chimuela,
sus cincuenta y dos huesos,
su muerte milenaria
de veinte años,
todas sus fracturas.
Hablo de sus hijos
no sabemos cuántos, dónde,
y de sus allegados:
Ardi, la de largas manos,
hallada junto a un río, su cadáver
recogido por partes y sus huesos
constelados sobre un fondo negro
son apenas el gesto borroso, movido
de un cuerpo. Hablo de ese carnal agradable
que primero encontró en su cara la sonrisa
e hizo de la amenaza de los dientes
una señal ambigua de afecto, y de una zarigüeya
con nombre de tía, *Juramaia Sinensis*, escasa
ascendiente de apetito fúnebre, *animalia chordata*,
rápida, trepadora, dúctil,
eutheria, la primera bestia verdadera.
Y también de los otros, ese
de nombre y vocación heroica, *Hynerpeton*,
el primero en dejar el agua. Hablo del reino
Animalia, celebro con ardor y arrebató*

Ode to My Ancestors

I don't mean my grandfather and his fleeting verve,
his gruff hands, I don't mean
his long-lived father or the maiden aunt
who did the milking,
or the other aunt whose death mid-autumn
halted the blackberry harvest. I have
too many bones in my mouth. I mean
my other ancestors: Lucy, toothless,
her fifty-two bones,
her millenary death
at twenty years old,
all her fractures.
I mean her children,
who knows how many, or where,
and their kin:
long-handed Ardi,
found beside a river, her body
gathered up in parts, and her bones
bespangling a dark backdrop
are just the blurry gesture
of a human form. I mean the pleasant pal
who first unearthed the smile on his own face
and made the threat of teeth
into an equivocal sign of affection, and an opossum
with an aunt's name, *Juramaia sinensis*, rare
forebear of funereal appetites, *Animalia Chordata*,
speedy climber, ductile,
eutherian, the first real
beast. And the others, too, *Hynerypeton*,
of heroic name and vocation, the first
to leave the water. I mean the kingdom
Animalia, I praise with ardor and abandon

*a ese antecesor fogoso que inauguró el sexo
un buen día hace millones de años,
pero también a los ancianos platelmintos,
hermafroditas, parásitos, parcos,
con su acumulación humilde de neuronas.
Hablo de la simbiosis parasitaria
de eucariotas y procariotas,
de la incipiente mitocondria.
Cerebro, al fin,
a esa primera célula organizada,
a la primera huérfana
y la última, a ella, inmaculada madre unicelular,
sin pecado concebida, bendita
entre toda la materia estéril.
A ella, he olvidado su nombre,
Melusina, Laura, Isabel, Perséfone, María,
y bendito es el fruto de su vientre.*

that fiery ancestor who inaugurated sex
on one fine day millions of years ago,
but also the ancient Platyhelminthes,
hermaphrodites, parasites, sparing
with their humble hoard of neurons.

I mean the parasitic symbiosis
of eukaryotes and prokaryotes,
incipient mitochondria.

I celebrate, at last,
the first well-ordered cell,
the first to be orphaned
and the last, her, immaculate unicellular mother,
conceived without sin, holy
amid all barren matter.

It's her I praise, though I've forgotten
her name, Melusina, Laura, Isabel, Perséфона, María,
and blessed be the fruit of her womb.