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Five poems from *Witch in Mourning*

Maria-Mercè Marçal

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Cinc poemes de *Bruixa de dol*

BY MARIA-MERCÈ MARÇAL

Els núvols duien confetti a les butxaques

(Vaig desar a l'armari
aquell núvol més menut,
el que duia confeti a las butxaques.
Però, ai! . . . les arnes no dormen.)

I.

A l'Anna Costa

Com un secret d'aigua verda
els teus dos ulls m'han mirat.
Ai, estrella marinera,
ai, adéu,
estrella de la mar.

La mar guarda un cor d'estrella
a l'avenc del teu mirar
Anna, Anna,
marinera,

traginera de la mar.

L'arc del silenci tibet,
i, per sageta, l'estrella.
Ai, adéu,
marinera,
Anna de la mar.

Com un secret d'aigua verda
els teus dos ulls m'han mirat.

IV.

Velles correndes per a la Pepa

A Pepa Llopis

Ai, quina cara més clara,
veïna del meu carrer,
com la neu de la muntanya
o la flor del cirerer.
Com l'espiga del terror
que amb el sol fa la clucaina.
No hi hauria cisteller
que tan clara fes la palma,
veïna del meu carrer!

Ai, quina cara més clara,
veïna del meu carrer,
que s'hi posa la rosada
que canta el gall matiner.
Rosa vera del roser
al redol de cada galta,
porugues, troben recer
cuques de llum sense casa,
veïna del meu carrer.

Ai, quina cara més clara,
veïna del meu carrer.
Sense fanal ni alimara
faríeu llum al coster.
I si una ombra de nit ve
i en els vostres ulls s'hostatja,
la lluna farà el seu ple
al tombant de cada galta,
veïna del meu carrer.

Ai, quina cara més clara,
veïna del meu carrer,
com una casa enramada
amb brancades de llorer.
Amb brancades de llorer,
poliol fresc a l'entrada,
espígol sec al graner,
flor de saüc i herba sana,
veïna del meu carrer.

Quina cara feu més clara,
amiga del meu coster,
com la vela del veler
entre la pluja i l'onada.
Com la claror que s'amaga
en el vi bo del celler
i en vell cor del carrer
de Gènova on feu estada.
Veïna del meu carrer,
ai, quina cara més clara!

V.

Cançó de pluja

Si el sol puja escaletes

ens mullarem demà.
Tot just la pluja alerti
el gall del campanar
pel clar de les gateres
s'esquitllaran els gats
i sortirem nosaltres
per la porta més gran.
Gallarets de bugada
fugiran dels terrats.
Cargols i caragolines
ens acompanyaran.
Traurem les katusques
i un paraigua espatllat
i capa amb caperutxa
malgirbada amb un sac
i les ganes de córrer
i un delit prou estrany.
A cada toll que hi hagi
espernegarem tant
que escatxigarem tots els
mussols del veïnat.
Espolsarem les plantes
dels horts i dels ravals
i els arbres de la plaça
i les flors del solà,
i pararem la galta
per rebre-hi el ruixat.
Entomarem la dutxa
de totes les canals
i ens inventarem barques
a tols els xorregalls.
Si estevenet venia
amb l'agulló torçat
sabrem un sortilegi
que ens el farà ballar.
Balla que ballaria
avui i l'endemà,
fins que amb barret d'arestes
el sol haurà tornat

i haurà desat la pluja
al prestatge de dalt.

VIII.

Canço de fer camí

a Marina

Vols venir a la meva barca
—Hi ha violetes, a desdir!
anirem lluny sense recança
d'allò que haurem deixat aquí.

Anirem lluny sense recança
—i serem dues, serem tres.
Veni, veniu, a la nostra barca,
les veles altes, el cel obert.

Hi haurà remes per a tots els braços
—i serem quatre, serem cinc!—
i els nostres ulls, estels esparsos,
oblidaran tots els confins.

Partim pel març amb la ventada,
i amb nuvols de cor trasbalsat.
Sí, serem vint, serem quaranta,
amb la lluna per estendard.

Bruixes d'ahir, bruixes del día,
ens trobarem a plena mar.
Arreu s'escamparà la vida
com una dansa vegetal.

Dins la pell de l'ona salada
serem cinc-centes, serem mil.

Perdrem el compte a la tombada.
Juntes farem nostra la nit.

Five poems from *Witch in Mourning*

TRANSLATED FROM THE CATALAN BY CLYDE MONEYHUN

The clouds carry confetti in their pockets

(I packed away in the wardrobe
the very smallest cloud,
the one with confetti in its pockets.
But alas! ... moths never sleep.)

I.

to Anna Costa

Like a secret of green water
your two eyes have watched me.
Ah, mariner star—
ah, farewell—
star of the sea.

The sea keeps the heart of a star
in the chasm of your gaze.
Anna, Anna,
mariner—
sailor of the sea.

The bow of silence is drawn,

and, for an arrow, the star.
Ah, farewell,
mariner—
Anna of the sea.

Like a secret of green water
your two eyes have watched me.

IV.

Folk Song for Pepa

to Pepa Llopis

Oh what a shining face
my neighbor down the street;
like snow on the mountains
or the cherry tree blossom.
Like stems of sweet alyssum
that perish from too much sun.
No basket weaver could ever
make a palm gleam so bright,
my neighbor down the street!

Oh what a shining face
my neighbor down the street;
where morning dew rests
when the rooster crows.
True rose of the rose tree,
in the vines of your cheeks,
fireflies, frightened,
without a home, find shelter:
my neighbor down the street.

Oh what a shining face
my neighbor down the street;
without lamp or beacon

you would light up the coast.
Even if night's shadows came
and took lodging in your eyes,
the moon would be full
in both of your cheeks:
my neighbor down the street.

Oh what a shining face
my neighbor down the street;
like a house encircled
by laurel branches.
By laurel branches,
fresh pennyroyal at the door,
dry lavender in the barn,
elderberry and water mint:
my neighbor down the street.

Oh what a shining face
my neighbor down the street;
like the sail of a sailing ship
between rain and a wave.
Like brightness hiding
in good wine in a cellar
and in the old heart of the street
in Genoa where you stay.
My neighbor down the street,
oh, what a shining face!

V.

Song of the Rain

If the sun hides its face
we'll be soaked tomorrow.
Just as the rain rouses
the rooster in the belfry

the cats will slink away
through their cat doors
and we'll head outside,
but through the bigger door.

The white doves of the wash
will flee from the roofs.

Snails and slugs
will keep us company.

We'll bring galoshes
and a broken umbrella
and a hooded raincoat
poorly done up, with a bag,
and the desire to run,
and unfamiliar joy.

At every single puddle,
we'll stamp our feet so hard
that we'll splash all the little
owls in the neighborhood.

We'll shake all the plants
in the gardens and the yards
and the trees in the plaza
and the flowers on the porches
and we'll stop to feel
rain on our cheeks.

We'll take a shower
in every gutter
launching little boats
in every ditch.

If the scorpion shows up
with its crooked stinger
we'll know a magician
who can make it dance for us.

Dance and dance
today and tomorrow,
until sun returns
in its wide-brimmed hat
and puts away the rain
on a high shelf.

VIII.

Song for the Road

for Marina

Do you want to come on my boat?
—There are violets, in profusion!
We'll travel far without regretting
whatever we leave behind.

We'll go far without regretting
—and we will be two, we will be three.
Come, come to our boat,
the sails are raised, the sky open.

There will be oars for every arm
—and we will be four, we will be five!—
and our eyes, nomadic stars,
will forget all boundaries.

We set sail with the March winds
and clouds of restless spirit.
Yes, we will be twenty, we will be forty—
flying the moon for our flag.

Witches of yesterday—witches of today,
we will find ourselves on the open sea.
We will spread life everywhere
like a flowering dance.

In the skin of the salted wave
we will be five hundred, we will be a thousand.
We will lose ourselves in wandering.
Together we will make the night our own.

Translator Notes

Maria-Mercè Marçal was born in 1952, in the middle of the fascist dictatorship in Spain, which lasted from the end of the Civil War in 1939 to the death of Francisco Franco in 1975. Marçal writes, “A l’atzar agraeixo tres dons: haver nascut dona, de classe baixa i nació oprimida” [I thank fate for three gifts: having been born a woman, to the lower class, in an oppressed nation], a phrase that is still famous in Catalan graffiti today.

While her gratitude is sincere, it is also true that all three of these minority groups were losers in the Spanish Civil War who suffered terrible hardships under Franco. The working class, which had made progress toward workers’ rights prior to 1939, was squashed under the thumb of the government’s wealthy supporters. In Marçal’s “oppressed nation,” Catalan culture was suppressed and the Catalan language forbidden in schools, government, popular culture, and the arts. And Spanish women, who had won many rights before 1939, were returned to a state of near total patriarchal subjugation.

Coming of age as a poet just after Franco’s death, when fascist generals still wielded dangerous power in the fragile new democracy, Marçal was courageous in her vocal support of the 1970s liberation movements. She took to the streets in demonstrations demanding civil rights and women’s rights, and after writing early poetry in Spanish, decided to write exclusively in her native Catalan. She embraced the 800-year-old tradition of Catalan literature even as she recast it in her poetry to express modern sensibilities.

Marçal’s poetry challenges her translator with elliptical leaps of grammar, regional dialects and neologisms and changes of genre, technique, and voice from poem to poem. Though the book as a whole focuses on a consistent set of images and themes, the different sections employ different forms for specific aesthetic and thematic reasons. One section draws inspiration from folk songs in the manner of Garcia Lorca (one of Marçal’s great inspirations); another explores fractured postmodern sonnets; another, modernist free verse.

This section is modeled after children’s songs: the folk songs of motherhood as Marçal understood them, shared by women and children, but excluded from the patriarchal canon. They embody the voices and values of the community of women, and many of her modern versions are dedicated in name to the women and girls in her life. The greatest challenge was creating a translation that preserved at least a hint of the sheer beauty of the original Catalan. In the case of these children’s songs for adults, that meant preserving the surface level

Clyde Moneyhun is an associate professor at Boise State University, where he teaches writing and translation. Descended from Catalan-speaking ancestors, he translates twentieth-century and contemporary Catalan poets including Ponç Pons, Dolors Miquel, and Maria-Mercè Marçal. His translations have appeared in *Notre Dame Review*, *Inventory*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, and *Lyrikline*.

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Exchanges began in 1989-90, as a project of the Iowa Translation Workshop when I was director. The first issue was cyclostyled, the title being copied from Ulalume González de León's short story "Intercambios," translated by Stephanie Lovelady, a student in the Workshop. All texts were presented bilingually. [Continue reading...](#)
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