

T H E
A N G E L
O F R A I N

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Selected Poems Of
Gastón Baquero

~ ~ ~

Translated By
Greg Simon &
Steven F. White

*...Sure as life holds all parts together, death holds all parts
together;
Sure as the stars return again after they merge in the light,
death is great as life.*

-Whitman

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Prologue: On Both Shores

Gastón Baquero, who was born in Cuba in 1918 and died in Spain in 1997, made his mark on Cuban poetry at a time that was characterized by his mentor José Lezama Lima (1910-1976) as a state of poetic concurrence. At the end of the 1930s, a small group of young poets was ready to assault a literary scene codified by conformism and complacency as well as mediocre, elevated diction. With the magisterial figure of Lezama Lima as a rallying point, a generation or literary group called Orígenes began its activities. They identified themselves with a literary journal of the same name, which appeared from 1944-1956. It was a publication that was emblematic of this new poetic sensibility. Over this period of time, the writers associated with Orígenes would distinguish themselves with highly original poetic works derived from diverse sources such as Spanish Golden Age poetry, Imagism, French Surrealism (though to a lesser degree), as well as those opulent islands of poetry: Whitman, Valéry, Rilke and Eliot.

The unusually innovative and well-defined character of the group certainly can be attributed in part to the influence of two nourishing and enigmatic early works by Lezama Lima: *Muerte de Narciso* (1937) and *Enemigo rumor* (1941). This is also and especially true of Baquero's "Testament of the Fish" (1941), which incorporates a reflexive dialogue as it engages the substance of the universe with the penetrating and surprising plenitude of song.

Lezama Lima represents the extreme nature of the poetic act by means of absolute immersion in linguistic intimacy, a dazzling monologue. The author of *Paradiso* responds to poetic impulse dominated by the insatiable Eros of the word that rejects logic, harmony and unity as insufficient and imperfect in favor of a system that seeks an unconditionally poetic state in an oblique living relationship with a hyperstasis of language. Ultimately, it is about the elaboration, as Vico said, of a credible impossibility.

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Unlike Lezama Lima, Baquero, in his work, opens himself to the appropriation and reordering of a memory that allows him to reflect not *on* but *from within* the simultaneity of time. He never seeks to overburden or hide, but, rather, to cast a spell and reveal. Baquero presents himself to the reader as the spectator who witnesses a legacy that integrates and reorders, amplifies and subverts, but which, above all, represents a resistance to death as well as its corollary, oblivion.

Gastón Baquero belongs to that rare minority of poets, who, like Rimbaud or Eliot, reveal their mastery even in their earliest works. Cintio Vitier wrote the following about the handful of poems by means of which Baquero came to be known: “His poems arrived and established themselves in light as if they had always been there, familiar in their secret and grave magnitude.” And María Zambrano, based on her first readings of this work, mentioned its “sumptuous sensuality” and said that those initial poems are a confirmation as to how the “richness of life, the delirium of substance, can stand before the void.” The dream of metamorphosed forms from which the poet contemplated the city, his city, in his “Testament” was a witness of everyday life and its magical qualities. The poet transforms it into a new substance, happily touched by the angel of revelation as in the splendid poems “Genesis,” “Adam in Paradise,” “Dawn,” “Rain,” “The Sun is the Statue of the Moon,” “Memory” and the deeply moving sonnet dedicated to García Lorca, “F.G.L.”

After 1942, for several decades, Gastón Baquero seemed to silence his poetry. Dedicated entirely to journalism, the poet made himself invisible. From the time of his arrival in Spain in 1959, as an exile from Cuba, Baquero recovered the poetic word and, in 1966, published his *Memorial de un testigo*, which was greeted

with enthusiasm by a number of the younger Spanish poets. Far from cultivating disenchantment and resentment, his new poems were inscribed in the enchantment of language and elaborated a surprising mirror that gave Baquero a marvelously expressive and playful lucidity. Although Baquero wrote this book from the perspective of his own emotional maturity, it would be difficult to maintain that it

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represents the culmination of his poetry. Given the powerful shadow cast by his first work, Baquero's later poetry can permit itself the luxuriousness of considering progress just another distraction. If we judge this book as not superior to his earlier writings, it isn't due to current depreciation, but rather to the overwhelming poetic grandeur of the previous work.

Installed in this new stage of his writing, Baquero preferred a poetic discourse that was closer to orality. He joined a tenuous irony and the colloquial tradition of Imagism, blending it together with an occasional rhetorical effusiveness. His later poetry seeks an intimate and conversational tone, remaining on guard against hyperbole and excess. In an essay on Luis Cernuda, Baquero announces his goal as a poet: "To achieve a direct, naked voice made from the economy of the indispensable, and sufficient to express feelings and ideas." Good examples of this *ars poetica* are his poems "Homage to Jean Cocteau," "Luminous Nocturne" and "Silent Companion."

In 1984, Baquero published his complete poems in Madrid. In 1991, he brought out his last single collection *Poemas invisibles*, about which the Spanish poet Luis Antonio Villena wrote: "It is a grouping of texts in which the most refined culture is allied with dream and fantasy, invention is mixed with music, the versicle takes control and reigns supreme, and metaphysics embraces irony as well as skepticism as if it were taking passion by the hand." Poems such as "The River" and "Sonnet to the Rose" exemplify this poetics.

Gastón Baquero was always a modest poet. He presumed his invisibility. It was not for nothing that he entitled his last book *Poemas invisibles*, because, despite his enormous respect for writing, he insisted on the refuge of accompanied solitude and undercut the importance of the trappings of celebrity with a fine sense of criollo humor. From his house in Madrid, he seemed to

contemplate the world of vanities, and the circumstantial, ephemeral flashes of fame in others. He did so with the dignity granted by the distance and decorum of the exiled island dweller who converted himself into “an invisible island.”

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Octavio Paz affirmed that between the solitude of creation and the noise of the exterior world, the writer should establish a new space: dialogue. As it grows, Baquero’s poetic discourse becomes increasingly populated with dissimilar, discontinuous, fragmentary voices. His poetry seems suspended between the nostalgia of an irrecoverable totality and the dizzying border of what is purely immediate and dispersed. From his writings, we discover that we are many things at once, but that these presences are not necessarily manifested in continuity, nor do they acquire prominence in a homogeneous unity. Instead, they dissolve and fragment into an uncertain plurality. All this leads Baquero to deposit the bittersweet almond of a certain skepticism in his readers – a foreseeing distance, an accomplice’s wink, a malicious sign to be alert and avoid unruly enthusiasm or the clumsy solemnity of certainty. Nevertheless he does not disdain shared suffering or the deafening murmur of misery, or homelessness or death – “that which transforms every name into a preterit.”

The thirteen poems gathered in this brief anthology will be sufficient to whet the reader’s appetite. They will also serve as an invitation to turn to the whole of Baquero’s poetic output, as it has come down to us: diminished, essential, and utterly free of cant. Without betraying the original impulses of these poems, poets Greg Simon and Steven F. White have tried to reproduce for Baquero’s new readers in English “those tremors of astonishment we hope for,” as Borges once wrote about the good translator’s labor.

Distant from all orthodoxy, suspicious of all univocal and exclusionary discourse, Gastón Baquero has become the most influential poet of new generations of poets in Cuba. Younger writers have discovered a wall against intolerance in Baquero’s discreet skepticism. Within him there was always the impassioned heartbeat of his land, a yearning that was serene and removed from a facile sentimentality. Cuban to his core, which means African and Spanish, Baquero opened his door to any young Cuban who

lived on the Island or elsewhere. The forced exile did not succeed in hiding him. The hostile silence of the commissars who wanted to erase his

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name merely produced a growing emptiness that the young poets sought to fill by making a pilgrimage to Baquero's home in Madrid so they could touch the man with no name.

Baquero understood the past, present and future of Cuban letters. It is for this reason, meditating no doubt on the dialectics of inside and outside in relation to nineteenth-century Cuban writers such as José María Heredia and José Martí, that Baquero wrote: "The common pride in our culture of years gone by, written in or far from Cuba, is nourished every day, at least in me, by the poetry written by those who live in Cuba or outside Cuba today, writing that will continue tomorrow and always. On both shores, there are marvelous young people. Blessed be their names! Nothing can dry out the tree of poetry."

Pío E. Serrano
Madrid, Spain

1

Genesis

His dark body rides toward light
with stone knees and some newborn algae
still clinging to his fresh cheeks,
his hands buried in the clay.

And his unborn head-to-be, soft seat
of secret light, of waiting too long,
rose, then, and followed the seed
through bitter realms, set free by the word.

Adam was still blind when the regal hand
imparted its wet touch to his cold face.
Through the water-word, he became human.

Through water, anguished cry and delirium,
he moved toward the garden nearby,
and with his light, he set a cold star ablaze.

Adam in Paradise

Adam takes his very first stroll alone
with the origin of wind in his hair,
destroying empty space, giving human
breath to stars and desire to all metals.

Now the universe is a Sabian garden
that sings, a perfumed place that turns
the ground into earth, the air into wind,
expanding the light to unveil desire.

Where burning lava once burst into flame,
the color of green moss is spreading.
Where fires raged, there is a temperate land;

fruit, not stone; a memory that recalls
an eternity with no start or end,
and a God lost in thought, then simply lost.

Dawn

You wake up, amazed to be awake.
 One more day death has passed you by.
 And life, it's still alive?
 Look: everything's o.k. Universe in order,
 the sun's out –
 warmth for skin and ice for the soul –
 you know, the sun *is* the enemy of darkness
 and of our ways to be sad.
 The sun takes sides with life, but when the moon
 rises, we're given over to its death.

Tomorrow sends out its weary theater:
 a boastful rooster, a baker, a tireless
 mother who's making coffee for us. You know,
 the stuff we need to steady us for putting on
 makeup in the a.m.,
 carrying us through to *Good Morning!*
How are you? Is everything o.k.?
 No problem. Stop trembling. Everything's o.k.
 We still have
 one day left of vacation
 from the cemetery. Long live life!
 So, let's see: shoes, pants,
 shirt, a watch with time ricocheting inside.
 No problem. Tomorrow goes by, hawking its wares,

saying: *No more anything.*
Put your right foot forward. Savor the day.
Just go out and live! Today is beautiful.
Forget about bones.

*Rain**I*

Rain's invisible children,
Whir of magic beings flying past,
Flower stems, birds
In its distant gardens – the green of an iris –
Listeners who play dressed in snow,
Who shift in the water's purity
As they contemplate the rain's profile.

II

Inside the rain I see
A woman spinning,
A distinguished man whose beard
Is braided among the tree limbs,
A white guitar, resonating with
The peculiar voices of those I love.

III

What kind of rain is like a voice recalling
The silence that accompanies death?

What kind of rain is the cradle of thought,
Of the secret dream that sustains us?

What kind of rain is this rain I remember
Falling from the sun yet still rain within rain?

IV

The thought that lies down
Like a weary bird
In its boundless nest in the rain...

Alone with rain and emptied space,
In the continuous solitude of the rain,
And in that space, your quartz-clear speech...

V

When rain falls,
It's as if women were sobbing.

It falls over the flowers
Most carefully
As if it cupped a message from the sky
In the living palms of its hands.

A flower man out in the rain –
Every day his language is sadder.

No one has ever seen a rose
Destroyed by the rain.

When rain rises,
It's as if all the bees
In their swarming
Could strip the heavens naked.

VI

A woman sings while the rain falls.
Sings while the rain spills its purest silence.
I'm listening to a miracle: her song is
More silent than the music of rain.

VII

I imagine rain in the sky,
Getting ready to go out, looking hastily for its gloves.
Soon it will head down to earth,
With crimson lips, eternal sunset on its cheeks,
Incomparably graceful curls,
And the gray parasol that never forgets.

VIII

Drops of water spatter on
A perfect shoreline of shoulders.

Short arrows of snow mark a sea-lane
For a dolphin with what seems to be scorned
By these burning kisses. Now I hear
The sadness always hidden by rain
And the nostalgia it inhabits,
Its failed dream of binding a gaze
With the bonds of love.
My heart smiles wryly at the sky
And is one with the rain and its soul.

IX

Water is only
The rain's shadow.

That's why nightingales
Surrender their songs
To the rain.

Water is the only prison
For the body of a bird.

X

The window peers at the rain
With the keen eyes of a bird!

It stares like a girl, amazed
By the rain that strikes the glass.

Love begins to build its roof:
Rain is always a girl
Whose heart destroys beauty.

XI

Turn as if you were returning
From the place where a shadow
Is the only tree.

Turn as if you were returning
With a simple definition of sky –

Just a cloud-grove, unending star-forest,
Vibrating meadow of memory.

Pretend as if you know whose face
Is illumined when
The angel of rain is dreaming.

The River

For José Olivio Jiménez

I've spent sixty years on the banks of a river.
Only those who are living there can see it.
People heading toward the western market
looked at us with fear. They don't understand
why the dampness would cling to our clothing,
or how we'd reel in those fish for them,
 the color of blood oranges,
from the invisible water.

One day a man fell in, and did not reappear.
Passers-by, interrupting errands to the market,
exclaimed, "Where did he go?"
 "When is he coming back?"
and, "How marvelous, those fiery yellow fish!"
Those of us born to the river kept quiet.
Smiled enigmatically. Said nothing. Gave no sign.
The language of our tribe is silence.
We wanted to protect our invisible river.
 On its banks
the world belonged to us –
 as did its mystery.

Sonnet to the Rose

*Raises from the rose-ash
The ghost of the rose...*
-Francis Thompson

Rose lives, when the rose is dead...
-Shelley

Seriously, the face of the rose
is a mute universe as it flashes
the fading rose into the laid-out rose
and the silent form it originates.

Close to death, everlastingly silent voice,
in smooth appoggiatura it lifts
the rose's music of fallen roses
toward the infinite, purifying sky.

How sadly the rose returns to roseness
beneath the bitter symbol of the impure
rose beneath the rose that's lost its light.

What allows it to inhabit the most obscure zone
in order to reach the sky and silently
tilt toward music and pure revolving?

Oh, sweet mirror of the rose!

You go to nothing, and by searching for
the tree-of-nothing –stationary rose –
you transfigure the form of your being.

Homage to Jean Cocteau

Il vous faudrait mourir pour joindre les deux bouts.
-Jean Cocteau, on the death of Eluard

The rope dancer, crossing at the apex of the circus,
astonishes his audience.
People can't believe how he feels his way past mirrors,
 pleading for keys
in order to get across that other, tenser, more perilous wire.
On each side, angels dressed as harlequins support him,
above the womb that is the night.

Who could always be the innocent child,
innocent, I mean, as the owner of a thousand secrets!
And, fortunately, he has given us the skilled disguise
 or the snowball,
the ability to dream that a horse is a candelabrum,
a flame thrower to hold onto as we cross the plains of
 death.

God has to be at the other end of that wire;
it's not possible that only the void awaits us there,
 opening its powerful jaws.
It's good to walk on the tightrope, leap like the clowns,
or pirouette like a swan;
it's good to shout *olé* to the smile of a stuffed swallow,
and the little bullfighter
killed by surprise.
It's good to get a steel nightingale started on its trajectory
 every night
in order to extract from its guts
the music deposited there by the last Orpheus.

11

The railroad line that seemed interminable
made a quick cut like a knife over a ditch impossible
to jump.

The rail car emptied in a second:

Hey, you! Comrades, friends, watchmen, don't go!

Take me to your game, to the other magic acts, please!

Quick! Run! Pull a rabbit from your hat!

Bring Nijinsky back to life!

Do something! Let me have another ride on the carrousel,
or turn into a statue,

or paint another little star on the door to Eurydice's
bedroom!

We must die, my friend, in order to unite the extremes
of this daily wire
stretching over the chasm of being alive.

No mistake about it: we must die so we can begin
to understand

if it's true that poetry must exist, that there are
guardians on the other side of the castle, an orchestra
and a theater.

And, above all, my friend, we must die
in order to be persuaded – no, totally convinced –
the sun of the statues *is* the moon.

“The Sun of the Statues Is the Moon”

La lune est le soleil des statues
-Jean Cocteau

Let's close this book where astronomy
passes downtrodden between faded color photos.
We need more than the trembling outline of Cassiopeia,
fine dust that is less urban than stellar.
Let's close the ancient book. Let's fold this page ten times.
Put the Great Bear in a hidden pocket with the Moon
and the Centaur.

The sky is complete. Another great miracle!
Today the astronomers let the moon
wander a little, just for a few hours,
peering into pines, streets, and pathways.

Take your exclamation from those festival days.
Here's the moon! Nothing less than the moon!
Set your watch back! Ask for a black horse!
Ask for a bouquet of violets, ribbons on a bottle of perfume.
We'll pour a domestic cup of water over the statue's
living hair.
You see? The sun. Diamonds. Midnight – its flaming
chariot, thawing out the moon.

Luminous Nocturne

*Music I heard with you was more than music,
And bread I broke with you was more than bread...*

-Conrad Aiken

Like a violently yellow map painted on a gray wall,
or a butterfly appearing so unexpectedly among children
in a classroom,
when the way is darker than the night of the blind as they roam
in a labyrinth –
a surprising human figure might yet appear, like a sweetly
burning taper,
like a private sun or a memory that, *yes*, stars *and* beauty exist,
a lovely thing still singing among ancient veins in the earth.

Like a map or a butterfly that remains stuck in a mirror,
the sweet skin invades and illuminates the dark meadows
of the heart.

So unexpectedly, like lightning or a flowering tree,
this luminous skin is suddenly the most beautiful adornment
of a life.

It's the response of impenetrable night to interminable demands:
a golden flame, a radiance that defeats each abyss,
a mysterious companion, impeding our sadness.

Like a map or a butterfly – to love is so easy.
Goodbye to shadows, to drowned days of disgust,
to the Nothing that spirals and dissipates!
To love is to see the taper burn in someone else,
a manageable and private sun
that takes us by the hand like a blind man lost in darkness,
and illuminates the long and stormy tunnel

of our days,

each time more radiant,
until the darkness that cloaks antiquity disappears,
and in its place, everything is music: quiet, delightful,
an exceptional mixture of joy and pain
that might entrance a child so that he doesn't dare open his eyes
or say a word,
for fear the light will disappear, the taper tumble
to the ground,
and everything around him turn into night,
the interminable midnight of the blind.

Testament of the Fish

*(Violin Concerto
by Alban Berg)*

You're the city I love,
even if I can only hear you murmuring from far away,
even though I'm an invisible island in your oblivion,
even when your tremors echo and you forget me,
I still love you.

Yes, I love you,
when the rain suddenly springs from your mind,
threatening to dissolve the multitude that is your face,
when the stars hurl their hope
right at the silent crystal where I live,
when I know you're suffering,
when I hear only your ghostly laughter,
when my skin burns in your memory,
when you remember, deny it all, come back to life, or die,
I still love you.

Yes, I love you,
when you lower yourself in rage or ecstasy
into the brief tomb of the night,
when you lift runaway eyelids
and force back the chaste burning of desire,
when you let the sun cascade
like a river of silent bees,
like an apple's innocent face,
like a boy who welcomes a kiss on the cheek.

You're the city I love,
because you seem so far from death,
because death passes by and you stare
with the unblinking eyes of a fish, with your radiant
face like a fish always engaged in its freedom.
Because death arrives and you feel
the way it moves invisible hands,
the way it grabs and whimpers for more, the way it snarls...
And you see it, hear it without moving, hold it in contempt.
You dress death in stone clothing,
dress it as city, disfigure it,
giving it the multiple face you call your own,
dressing it as church, plaza or cemetery,
making it motionless beneath the river,
making it feel like some millenary bridge,
bringing death back as stone, as night,
as a city sick with love, and you hold it in contempt,
defeat it, lay it out
as if it were a taxidermied dog,
or some dead guy's cane
or the words he killed.

You're the city I love,
because death never abandons you,
because the death-dog follows you
and licks you from head to foot,
because death is what shapes your dream
like one of its visceral, nocturnal inventions,
silences the moaning as you pretend to sleep,
and you feel that visceral growth inside you
as death strolls through your gardens with its
poppy-colored eyes,
its lovesick mouth, its starlit lips.

You hear how it gnaws and licks,
how it suddenly snatches a son,
one of your flowers, destroys your garden,
strikes your eyes and you stare
as it carries off your indifferent smile,
letting it dream of death's empire,
dreaming your name and your destiny.
But you're the city that's the color of the world,
you're the one who makes death exist;
death is a prisoner in your hands.
It is your stone houses, your streets, your sky.

I'm a fish, an echo of death.
In my body, death moves closer
toward tender, echoing lives,
and now I sense it in my embodiment,
before your very eyes, your oblivion. City! I'm dying,
turning into the indestructible form of a fish,
forever more alone with my soul.
I feel death staring at me.
What a strange journey it began through my soul!
What a strange way of inhabiting my most
 silent days on earth!
And meanwhile, dear city, you rest and forget.

I don't want to die, dear city, I'm your shadow,
the one who stays awake for the outline of your dream,
directs the light right to your doors,
watches over your sleep or awakens you.
I'm a fish. I've been a child and a cloud.
I was a geranium somewhere along your streets.

Beneath some sky, I was sweet rain,
then pure snow, clean wool, a woman's smile,
hat, fruit, noise, silence,
dawn, nocturne, impossibility,
ripening fruit, a long and shining blade...
I'm a fish. I've been an angel,
sky, paradise, ladder, uproar,
hymnal, flute, guitar,
flesh, skeleton, hope,
drum and a tomb.

You're the city I love,
when you're persistent,
when death has to sit down
like an enormous drunk to contemplate you,
because you constantly lift what its eyes
destroy with no respite,
because if a boy dies, you make him eternal,
if a nightingale perishes, I hear your echoing bells.
And you're always absorbed in thought, dear city,
creating your eternal resemblance,
disdaining death,
cutting off its breath with your laughter,
pushing its back against a wall,
inventing your sea, skies and sounds,
opposing death with your composition –
impalpable fabric knotted with hope.

I'd love to be tomorrow in your streets,
an inconsequential shadow, an object, a star,
to navigate your hard surface and leave the sea behind
with its mirror of moribund forms
where nothing remembers your existence.
I'm lost in you, dear city,
held fast in your folded hands,
eternal fish, eternal eyes,
feeling you pass before my gaze,
losing myself one day to cloud and anguished cry,
contemplating, dear city, from your single, humble sky,
how your gigantic shadow labors on,
asleep and awake,
in autumn, in winter,
in the middle of green spring,
in the radiant extension of summer,
in the musical homeland of fruit,
in sunlight, in shadows moving along walls,
feverishly working against death,
defeating it, dear city, forever born anew, dear city,
in your golden fish, your children, your stars.

Memory

Night, a woman in her husband's
arms, lying down with the earth...

In the distance, a cluster of stars
talks freely about things the gods do.

A white, white bird lands on the plain.
You can hear the sea, and when the sky
strings lights through the clouds' azure mane,
you remember that it *is* night.

I remember this silence from somewhere else:
I've been to a place where the rose is real.

Silent Companion

*(Based on a photograph
of Rilke as a child...)*

So I guess I'm alone,
I'm an island, one could say, deaf and sterile.
So I'm alone, love's widower, vagabond,
but leading a mysterious child by the hand.
And sometimes he grows up quickly, becoming a soldier in chains,
an old man lost in thought, a guest in the kingdom of the brilliant.
And then he begins to shrink until he turns into a child again,
with his eyes that could be named the Secret itself, his useless
whip,
his amazement.
And this retractable child who accompanies me is occasionally
called Rainer,
and otherwise The One Who Is Present, The Orphan Knight,
or The Soldier Who Never Rests...
He communes with the communicable world beyond the grave,
and knows the language of those who are condemned to abandon
their bodies,
and who, stripped to their souls, struggle to convince God
that a big mistake has been made.

So now I'm alone, in the middle of this cold cellblock called
the universe,
where the weight of the stars, the imponderable weight of Ariadne,
is as indifferent as the pressure of blood to a vessel

or the blind current of marrow inside bones.
So now I'm alone, and I see that God could care less
if life takes a man's outer shape on loan, or a crustacean's shell,
or that my own rage can't change the fact that Pergolesi's life
means
 less than the foolish turtle's,

or that this ray of light doesn't illuminate a thing,
and how the sun doesn't even suspect it's our second father.

So now I'm alone, and next to me this child with a coiled whip
pours out his knowing gaze like company, afraid because he
can foresee

the empty future that awaits.

So now I'm alone, and this child pummeling my shoulder,
isolated from the crowd, yet full of pity for it,
leans over the center of the mystery,
striking me and cursing,
making both clay and archangel tremble
because it is the Testimony, the prodigious child who attracts
the crown of thorns,
the asphyxiating truth of a heaven that is deaf and blind.

When I'm alone in my own dream,
I hold up my hand so I can't see the abyss,
and it's a real hand, a concrete universe of a hand,
a hand with its own destiny, inexorably created in order to be
bones and dust,
made to break my solitude so it can hold onto that child's hand
for dear life as we head
toward the forest where the Unicorn sings,
where the poor maid combs her hair incessantly
while she waits and waits and waits and waits,
accompanied by the broken solitude of other beings
who are conscious of the mystery, persistent with their questions,
refusing to die without having found the key to the prison door.

So I guess I'm alone
but carry around a world of apparitions,
enigmatic realities like *bread* and *chair*;

and now I'm not amazed when someone calls me Roberto or
 Antonio or Segismundo,
 or even that perhaps I'm a tree where a pilgrim rests,
 and in his mind the person that I am lives as a metaphor
 of his reality –
 because I know I'm here, really here – I could have been
 destroyed, but instead I'm irrevocable,
 and if I am a dream, it's a dream no one can erase,
 and a distant voice confirms everything we anticipate,
 and another says – *No! I don't want to hear it!* –
 Not even God can spring us from this imprisonment
 because He's caught up in it, too, and can't stop being God,
 because the Creation fell from His hands into the abyss,
 so perfect and complete that the Lord, satisfied,
 dedicated Himself to creating everything else,
 and goes from one celestial garden to another, winding
 the clocks, stirring the fires,
 and no one knows where He walks now, in broad daylight
 or at night,
 nor on which star He might be renewing His curious experiment,
 nor why He won't let us see the keys to our prison,
 the exit from this mirror without a frame
 where now and then it seems He pauses to reflect His own image,
 in which, when we approach it, trembling, we recognize
 the clear face of Nothingness.

I walk toward dawn or death with this child holding a whip.
 I understand everything has already been written, erased, and
 written again,
 because a man's earth-worn skin is a palimpsest on which the
 Demon
 himself
 scribbles and revises his poems.

I understand everything's been written, and I reject this skyless
rain of an anguished cry;
I understand the past birth of butterflies
that will make us clap with joy when, inexorably, a child
is born tonight,
and I sense that everything was written thousands of years ago,
and for the millennia,
and I exist within that:
I write the desperation of the desperate and the conformity
of those who conform,
and then I start to walk, shrugging my shoulders, not laughing
or crying,
nothing useless like that,
leading this child by the hand, my silent companion,
or dreaming God's dream of leading a child by the hand
before he stops being an angel
so that, with the arcane fire of his eyes,
he can light our way in the garden of death.

F. G. L.

Peace. Now it's death that has landed
on the steel bands around his chest.
Today the dawn unmakes his bed,
and his dreams play on in the mirror.

A whole life has been summoned into
a limitless field, space still empty
of his being. He decides to go,
to hear his luminous silence spill.

He will need to drink the fragrance
of the snow he shelters, of the sands
that could open and swallow a bull.

Dream of him as our gift to God, bursting
with laughter, verse, passion. Dream of him –
Sweet fires on unseen shores start to sing.

Translators' Afterword

Our first introduction to the Cuban poet Gastón Baquero came on the luxurious AVE “bullet train” between Madrid and Seville, as it sped back to Atocha Station in the early evening of July 5, 1999. Steven F. White and I had spent a fabulous, productive but very hot day in Seville, a rich and sensuous city, not unlike Baquero’s poems, of extreme density, complex, narrow passageways, and astonishing reservoirs of emotion. As my heat-stunned body tried to cool down in the comfort of the train, and my mind struggled to make sense of the wealth of images, information and personalities with which it had been bombarded during the day, I desperately wanted to drift off into sleep. But my restless friend had Baquero’s *Poesía completa* (Editorial Verbum, Madrid, 1998) in his hands, a volume presented to us the day before in Madrid by its editor, Pío E. Serrano, and he kept shaking me awake every two or three minutes. “Greg!” he’d whisper fiercely. “Wake up! You’ve got to see *this!*”

The book he was trying to show me, with which I have since become very familiar, is indeed an impressive publication, and well worth whatever sacrifice of comfort or sleep might be required to get to know it. An obvious labor of both integrity and love, it presents all of the known poetry in book or anthology form that Baquero published during his lifetime (1918-1997), in both Cuba and Spain, as well as groups of uncollected and unpublished poems, and juvenilia. As we are among the first miners of this rich lode to be working in English, Steve and I, with Pío’s permission, felt free to roam through the various collections and sequences at

will. We then chose, for our selection, only those poems that seemed to make their presence most strongly felt in translation after we had ascertained, to the best of our ability, their strength in Baquero's Spanish.

This admission that our method was intuitive, and not intended to represent either a critical or exhaustive approach to Baquero, should not be interpreted as a dictum that alternative approaches are not possible or even desirable. Pío E. Serrano, for instance, has been

tireless in his role as Baquero's editor, and the nine pages of biblio-graphical material he provided in *Poesía completa* would serve as a more than adequate starting point for any critical assessment of the poet's entire work.

Steve and I took as a conscious guideline Pío's suggestion that Baquero's later poems, written in exile in Spain after a lengthy poetic silence, represented "a lucid and marvelously bright expressiveness, geometrically inverse to the tonal gravity adhered to so rigorously in his early poems..." It was among the poems from Spain, for example, that we discovered *Silente compañero*, that dense and stupendous antidote to the manic gloominess of *Testamento del pez*.

Not that gloom was unjustified. Baquero's name, Serrano informs us, was removed from dictionaries and textbooks in Cuba after he was exiled, his works were banned and further publication prohibited. Luckily for us, a totalitarian approach to literary criticism never succeeds, except perhaps to whet an appetite among those who are supposedly being protected from alleged heterodoxy. In his private library, for example, Serrano has a collection of Cuban poetry books and anthologies that were printed surreptitiously on grocery bags, illustrated by hand and bound with string, and then smuggled out of Cuba. I feel it is due in large part to the perseverance of these unsung poets (and their librarians) that a brand-new, comprehensive anthology of Baquero's poetry, *La patria sonora de los frutos*, edited by Efraín Rodríguez Santana, was published in Havana in 2001.

Baquero's reaction to his exile was very complex. Not only did he seemingly forbid himself any direct mention of it in his poetry ("neither disenchantment nor resentment," Serrano says), he reached very deeply into the pocket of irony and called one of his books *Poemas invisibles*. But however cool his attitude, it is difficult for this reader not to equate the many references in the late poems to Adam's expulsion from the Garden of Eden with the poet's own exile. The most irrefutable of responses, of course, is writing rooted so deeply in the lush garden he was expelled from that it effortlessly creates a

concurrent, active nostalgia for places on earth any readers might have been separated from.

Every exiled poet fights to get back with his words. After his expulsion, Baquero plunged into his mentor José Lezama Lima's "absolute immersion in the intimacy of language." But Baquero did not continue to present his findings in Lezama's manner as a *monólogo deslumbrante* (as Pío E. Serrano puts it). No, the proper expression would be *dazzling dialogue*, as Baquero launched into collaboration with all of his other mentors, poetic and musical. Steve and I have chosen to translate what he wrote in homage to Rilke, Cocteau and García Lorca, but the names of his other collaborators make up a veritable who's who of modern literature and recorded music.

References in several of Baquero's longer, free verse poems, not presented in this volume, indicate an awareness of Lorca's presence in Havana in 1930, when Baquero himself would still have been a teenager. Had the two poets met, they certainly would not have wasted time discussing Baquero's potential as an agronomist, a career he pursued, but then abandoned for journalism and poetry. Nor would it have been profitable for them to consider Lorca's prospects as a lawyer, the path (not followed) that had been chosen for him by his father. In fact Lorca, at age 32, was living on a monthly allowance from his parents, picking up extra cash by lecturing in various Cuban towns on music and poetry, and still very much on the cusp of world-wide acclaim and financial success as a playwright. His arrival in Havana was announced in the daily newspaper *Diario de la Marina* by one of its columnists, Rafael Suárez

Solís. In just a few years, Baquero would become a very successful columnist for that same newspaper. But Jesús Díaz, a fellow Cuban who brilliantly eulogized Baquero in the Spanish newspaper *El País* in 1997, correctly reminds us that Baquero in the '30s was a man who had been "born with everything to lose: he was black, gay, poor and a poet in Cuba – a racist, male-dominated country obsessed with social classes in which writing poetry is a profession for crazy people." What Lorca and Baquero would

have found in common, besides a deep and abiding love of poetry,
was even rarer: “absolutely

exceptional intelligence and character,” according to Díaz, that would eventually allow both of them to thrive as artists despite their forced existence in and expulsion from societies that were basically hostile to their deepest aspirations.

However imaginary the contact might have been between Lorca and Baquero’s Havana, it was certainly nourished and maintained by Baquero as a life-long affinity for Lorca and his poetic techniques. Long persuasive passages of free verse are interspersed, as in Lorca’s collected poems, with sequences of sonnets, madrigals, and other traditional forms. There are occasional bows to surrealism, but more often than not Baquero’s poems exhibit the strategies and expectations of spiritualism and incantation. Their cumulative, almost painful urgency results from the poet’s faithful transmission of and complete acquiescence to the power of what has been transmitted as justification and proof of transformations. “*Through the water-word,*” Baquero tells us, the first Adam “became human.” And once he was human, he moved through water itself, through anguish and delirium, “toward the garden nearby,/ and with his light, he set a cold star ablaze.” It has been our purpose here to thrust a few of Baquero’s bashful psalms into the light. We are confident that soon enough other readers will begin to bask in their opulent, incandescent heat.

Greg Simon
Portland, Oregon

*Translators' Notes***Walt Whitman**

The epigraph, chosen by the translators, is from the last stanza of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

Giambattista Vico (*Prologue*)

Italian philosopher and social architect, who lived between 1668 and 1744.

Cintio Vitier (*Prologue*)

Cuban poet, born in 1921, founder of *Orígenes*.

María Zambrano (*Prologue*)

Andalusian philosopher and critic who taught in Cuba.

Luis Cernuda (*Prologue*)

Spanish poet from Seville, included in the Generation of '27, who died in Mexico City in 1963.

Luis Antonio de Villena (*Prologue*)

Spanish poet and literary critic, born in Madrid in 1951.

Octavio Paz (*Prologue*)

Poet and translator from Mexico, but also a social and literary critic whose brilliance may not be seen again for quite some time. Paz was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1990; he died in 1998.

Jorge Luis Borges (*Prologue*)

Argentine poet, translator and professional librarian. Borges perfected the short imaginative tale that is now synonymous with modern literature. He died in 1986.

José Olivio Jiménez (*The River*)

Contemporary Spanish poet and professor emeritus at NYU.

Francis Thompson (*Sonnet to the Rose*)

English poet born in 1857 and died in London on November 13, 1907. Thompson was also the author of a well-received monograph on Percy Bysshe Shelley. The epigraph is from a long poem entitled "The Mistress of Vision," published in *Sight and Insight* (1897). Section XXIV reads in full:

And as a necromancer
 Raises from the rose-ash
 The ghost of the rose;
 My heart so made answer
 To her voice's silver splash, --
 Stirred in reddening flash,
 And from out its mortal ruins the purpleal phantom blows.

Percy Bysshe Shelley (*Sonnet to the Rose*)

English poet born near Horsham, Sussex, on August 4, 1792, and drowned in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Italy on July 8, 1822. The epigraph is a misspelling but not a misuse of a line from one of Shelley's unpublished poems, *Memory*. Shelley suggests that like music and perfume, a rose's essence can live on after it has been cut from its stem:

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,
 Are heaped for the beloved's bed,
 And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,
 Love itself shall slumber on...

Music, when soft voices die,
 Vibrates in the memory.
 Odours, when sweet violets sicken,
 Live within the sense they quicken.

Paul Eluard (*Homage to Jean Cocteau*)

French poet and art collector, also associated with surrealism, who died in 1952.

Jean Cocteau (*Homage to Jean Cocteau*)

French poet, novelist and playwright, born near Paris on July 5, 1889 and died at Milly-la-Forêt on October 11, 1963. Cocteau's plays were an early and influential element in the development of surrealism.

Conrad Aiken (*Luminous Nocturne*)

Born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1889, and died there in 1973. The epigraph is from the first stanza of "Discordants," written during World War I:

Music I heard with you was more than music,
And bread I broke with you was more than bread;
Now that I am without you, all is desolate;
All that was once so beautiful is dead.

Alban Berg (*Testament of the Fish*)

Austrian composer, 1885-1935.

Rainer Maria Rilke (*Silent Companion*)

Austrian lyric poet who wrote in German and French. Born in Prague in 1875, and died in Switzerland in 1926. The photograph of Rilke as a child, referred to in "Silent Companion," can be seen on the cover of J. F. Hendry's *The Sacred Threshold: A Life of Rainer Maria Rilke*, Carcanet New Press, Manchester, 1983.

Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (*Silent Companion*)

Italian composer, 1710-36.

Federico García Lorca (*F. G. L.*)

Andalusian poet, born in 1899 and assassinated near Granada in 1936. Lorca presented lectures and poetry recitals throughout Cuba in the spring of 1930. According to Lorca's biographer, Ian Gibson, one of these events was attended by Baquero's poetic mentor, José Lezama Lima.

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