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A Young Woman Brought the First Flowers

Reina María Rodríguez
Translated by Kristin Dykstra

Abstract
A translation of an essay which is also a lamentation, taken from the book Otras cartas a Milena (Other Letters to Milena), by Reina María Rodríguez. Rodríguez writes about the exile and death of poets from the perspective of one who has not literally departed her own nation except for short trips, which have allowed her to encounter Cuban writers living abroad. Her reflections on loss, mortality and geography eventually focus on the figure of exiled writer Heberto Padilla, describing his desire to return to Cuba for a visit. Padilla passed away without receiving permission to return; Rodriguez challenges barriers blocking the return of the exiled writer. Her essay would “return” him to Cuba in textual form when this collection was published in Havana in 2003.

As it rains and the air recirculates humidity from the building’s aged walls, I read about the burial of Alexandr Blok, which Nina Berberova recounts in her autobiography. [...] The funeral took place on the tenth of August; not much later came the shooting of Akhmatova’s husband; and I can still hear the recitation of those lines of hers, some piled on top of others, like the rattling of the casket in its long box, in the center between the horses moving forward with many rhymed verses. “The location was deserted and quiet,” says Berberova. The place is intact. Just a few dried flowers that used to be white lilies, four of them to be exact, with long stems cut by a young woman who no longer exists: they’re next to my work table this morning.

One is from places far away. Places appropriate for something I wouldn’t know how to define. I found out that she was there too, at the end of an era, as the elderly Russian ladies (credulous) prayed and kept on observing their rituals so as not to lose the custom of petitioning. Nina was wearing a dress made from a curtain, maybe a white one, and her clenched fists were covered in reddish velvet taken from an old patch of carpet. This is what I have, a memory that arrives like a mutilated postcard, the scent of incense moving through a burner, carried by the aged priest leading the procession to the Smolensk cemetery. How does the death of a poet feel, the death of poems anticipated but never to arrive?

“He died in a cold classroom to the north and we couldn’t lay a blanket or oilcloth over him. Blok, Gumilev, Akhmatova, Marina, Heberto, and so many other burials I didn’t attend. Just “a melodious and rolling chant as they carried the body of the deceased...” The song of children in a dilapidated local church. An extraordinarily modest ceremony. Naked and with our heads covered, we, by contrast to them, move toward some lost cemetery that is also local, awaiting the turn of every dead poet who has come this far without an entry permit.
Too much pretense, this business about a burial plot for a poet. About finding things that not everyone will understand easily. Places, sites, bends. A poet is buried in words long before dying. He gathers leftover sensations, his splinters, to repair them. No distance between eras, or velocity, to dull the rattling of the car, the horses from that time. One poet has died, and then another. Always the same routine for dying: unfinished, halfway through or at the periphery of something.

We don’t know what his obsessions were. We know about texts that are intermediary, arrhythmic, like procedures. We can’t calculate how many minutes he spent facing the paper, planning to arrive, live, die entirely inside an image. How long each second stretched for returning and requesting shelter in his death. Each instant in which telling really costs a little something, a shooting, a negation, an end, a cent. Let’s not allow poets to die without sanctuary! Bring them to a safe location with four lilies, those white flowers that an unknown girl left, anticipating the horror to come after the freeze. Don’t leave him in exile, abandoned.

We didn’t know then whether we were the most blessed, or whether they would be the most blessed. We pushed the cart with creaking wheels down the middle of a road, one full of holes, badly filled potholes and waste. We bore a wandering body from the former century, and another one still preserved. The body had no visible signs of belonging to the moment or to the nation either. It was an ordinary body, rescued. Next to the body, a box lined with a black oilcloth and a few initials indicating a name: they carried his final poems stapled together, still with a certain vanity. The day’s drizzle got them wet and a light breeze whipped them around. It wasn’t about versifications, or poetry that was ancient or contemporary, or about Parnassians, Modernists or Surrealists. It was about the body of the poet who arrived with his manuscripts as if they were one and the same thing.

II

When I opened the email, very early, it contained the news in one single line sent by Francisco Morán from Arlington: “Heberto died.” I met Heberto Padilla in 1994 in Stockholm, during a conference of writers “from outside” and “from inside” the island, at a hotel where even the mirrors sparked with paranoia. Between dinners with tongue, drums of potatoes, meat from gray deer, apples and wine, we met by chance. He, always making jokes, falling ever more in love with life and with the Cuban poet Lourdes Gil, showed me how distance and extra-literary circumstances can distort an image. I was breaking through the stereotype they had given me, recreating this poet with his political humor and such an appetite for celebration. Something that had been a struggle for me, flying so far without knowing really how or why, took on meaning: the friendship born between swans and photographs, frozen against the backdrop of white Baltic nights.

When we met again that same year in Madrid at another conference called “The Whole Island,” he used excerpts from the young poets whose work I had given him in Stockholm, all then unknown in exile, for his talk. At that Madrid conference he left me his poetry in a white hardback edition.

In 1998 when I was at Princeton University, he and Lourdes Gil came to visit me at the house of a childhood friend living in New Jersey. They brought me a cream-colored, embroidered silk blouse as a gift. One of those women’s blouses sold at Chinese fairs, very expensive. We took photos, which I don’t have because they were on my friend’s camera. It was the last time I saw him.

Next we spoke by phone in February 2000. He was leaving that same day to teach classes, I think, in Philadelphia, and I was in NY, so we couldn’t get together. During this conversation he stressed his desire to visit the island, a process I had initiated after he had asked me to do so several years earlier. He said that no consideration “other than the desire he had to come to the island mattered anymore,” and I heard a sob from the other end of the line. It was sort of dry.

A few weeks before Heberto’s death, Armando Suárez Cobian sent me the request from Lourdes Gil over email from New York: Heberto was in poor health and wanted to come. I went back down the hallways with the request, insisting on Heberto’s desire to come back. Someone replied to me that “he would do everything within his reach to see that it happened, and he would bring Heberto.”

If culture serves to mediate with power, it should respond to
this petition and bring a poet, exiled and ill, to the land of his birth to say goodbye.

Which is why I am recounting this tale. It’s a debt. I don’t know why now, I don’t know why in November. I remembered all of it as Nina Berberova was retelling the death of Alexandr A. Blok, and I had to close her book. In our fleeting friendship there was something beyond what we could express through distance and paranoia. I have no intention of retrieving it with extra decorations: that’s how it was. A few photographs, some fraternal embraces, and a final farewell dance. I don’t want to extrapolate anything that couldn’t exist out of this. I have an “action” to undertake on behalf of dead poets.

Without permission Heberto Padilla entered the land of his birth, which was always the page. He entered his definitive page. For me, who heard him read his poems, make his jokes full of political humor; who heard his voice for the last time on the other side of the line (from that other side, against any unjust reasoning that didn’t allow him to return or, from so far away, come closer); for me he’s still here, still of the place he never left and to which he already returned.

III

I never wanted to lose that silence in his voice on the other end of the line. But we live because we’re capable of forgetting. When I write about it, I feel myself losing those pieces of conversation. A cadence mixed up in the paralysis of what I’m thinking today about his voice, a tone, some words; a memory interspersed between what I imagine to be his voice and now, the rhythm of his poems. I’m still afraid I’ve forgotten that voice, afraid I’m learning how to forget with every passing day. Not to speak of this thing that happened between us, his request made out of a desire to return not permanently but in a conscious way: it’s the beginning of a sinister forgetting. And an unsatisfied desire creates a rhetoric, a permanence. An unsatisfied forgetting creates a porous form of sorrow, which turns into betrayal. I don’t want to betray dead poets who now live on shelves. What importance is there in the amount of time one may have tried to occupy bookcases or metaphors? A poet’s moment fits inside a glass of water, and you can down it as a shot. There is no time “outside” or “inside.” A poet’s moment covers an era, the expanse of a single line, a single passion.

Each should choose the place where he wants to arrive as contraband. For Heberto Padilla, returning was the verification of his presence, already foreign, blurred on the island outside. Another metaphor. Because the island was inside, and his heart is buried in a plot of ground that you carry around unconsciously, in a pocket or a wallet, inside a shabby jacket, like an amulet. As J. Brodsky sought a cemetery for Anna Akhmatova over there, in Saint Petersburg, and went through the procedures (always those aggravating procedures in order to pick up or drop off a sensation, a body, a poet), we still didn’t even suspect, except “literally,” what it meant to ask for clemency, what it meant to accustom ourselves to petitioning for clemency, for entrance, shelter, a resting place.

What vanity is ours! What a luxury, to request!

Death got there before we did.