

Three Poems by Carlos Germán Belli

Translated and read by Karl Maurer

Hare-lip

This wolf-mouth of a world, that bristles even
with a hare-lip, whose gap the highest mountains
of earth cannot stop up, by luck has not,
like an unsalted alimentary bolus,
been shot to the remotest starry maw,
since in this strange world it is customary
for any foetus that has got this far
but grins from a hare-lip to be out-flung
in the fourth month or sixth, so that its corpse
will stop the crack at the end of that hare-lip.

Los Extraterrestriales

Yo nieto soy de Elvira de la Torre,
y cual ella cercándome hoy diviso
comensales por doquier,
ya de garfíos crinados, ya de trinchas
y largos cucharones como brazos,
y por lengua una daga
cual para la más dura vianda en mesa.

Pero no humanos, tales raros seres,
luciendo por afuera niquelados
(pues ni del orbe son)
y de hierro por adentro cuanto armados,
tornando en serrín las antiguas sillas, después
de expoliar fieros
los sandwiches terrestres para siempre.

Ya al alba compartir la sublunar
de roble mesa rústica me obligan
los desconsiderados
marcianos o lunares comensales,
o qué sé yo de qué planeta ajeno,
y mi ración se llevan,
luego de arar de miga en miga yo.

Si bien nada boyante porque iré
a la tumba seguro con gran gula,
sin dilación me asaltan,
o impíos bregan para mi engranar

The Extraterrestrials

I, grandson of Elvira de la Torre,
like her today besieging me descry
commensals everywhere,
now maned with drag-hooks, now with carving-knives,
and such long ladling spoons, that dangle arm-like,
and no tongue but a dagger
as for the toughest viands upon the board.

And yet not human are they, such rare beings,
all on the outside gleaming nickel-plated
(not of the orb they are)
and inside all of iron oh how armed,
as they reduce the antique chairs to sawdust,
when they have plundered fiercely
all the terrestrial sandwiches forever.

At dawn already me they bid assist
at the sublunar oaken rustic table,
the inconsiderate
commensals, Martian, or it could be lunar,
or what do I know from what foreign planet,
but with my portion make off
until, crumb after crumb, they plow up me.

And though not buoyant since I go securely
myself unto the tomb a hopeless glutton,
on me they set forthwith
and struggle godless to engear in me

sus cuchillos, sus trinchas, sus cucharas,
que si tan ruín estado,
¡Qué expolian, qué me trinchan, qué saquean!

their knives, their carving knives, their ladling spoons,
and though so mean the estate
how they despoil it, me how carve and plunder!

Recuerdo De Hermano

I

Al fin he descubierto palmo a palmo
cómo es la superficie de tus días,
y he debido cruzar osadamente
las montañas ceñidas por la nubes
y espumosos océanos que braman,
hasta llegar al punto
del cual tú nada sabes,
aunque allí tus espirituales huellas
diviso y palpo en todos los confines,
donde nunca has estado ni un instante.

II

Ni de las moscas los zumbidos leves
cuando solo te quedas de improviso
al salir cada cual afuera rápido
a hacer las cosas de la vida diaria,
contentos porque así de ti se alejan;
que tal falta de ruido
acá también se siente,
y es ese gran silencio que aparece
anidándose en los alrededores,
como si en vez de mí estuvieras tú.

III

Esos muros, el piso y el vacío
son como cosas corporales tuyas,
que en ti se han extendido hasta formar
contigo y con el cuarto un bulto único
todo de cal, arena, carne y alma;
y cómo por completo
reedificado ha sido
en lo remoto en que me encuentro hoy,
allí dándome cuenta mido al fin
tu cuadrado, tu círculo, tu mundo.

IV

Aunque así sea ingreso en esta réplica
de tu cuarto en un pardo sitio acá,
donde soy como clavo en la madera,
inmóvil, solitario exactamente
como tú en tu mismísimo recinto,

To My Brother

I

At last I have discovered inch by inch
how is the superficies of your days,
into which, daring all, I had to travel
over the mountains girdled by the clouds
or in the foaming and resounding oceans,
so as to reach the point
of which you nothing know
except that there your spiritual traces
I sight or palpate in these boundaries,
where you have never for one instant been.

II

Not even the light buzzing of the flies
whenever, suddenly, you are alone
since each has vanished rapidly outside
to do the little things of daily life,
glad that that way they move away from you;
and such absence of noise
in this place, too, is felt
and is an immense silence that appears
in the surroundings and there makes its nest,
as if instead of me it were you here.

III

Those walls, the apartment, and the emptiness
are like corporeal things of yours,
that have stretched into you, so as to form
from you and from the room a unique bundle
made out of salt and sand and flesh and soul;
and as if utterly
that has been reerected
in the remoteness where I am today,
in which I take the measurements at last
of your pure square, pure circle, purest world.

IV

Although thus there is entrance to this replica¹
of your apartment in a drab location
where now I like a nail am in the wood,
that motionless, alone, must be exactly
like unto you inside your so same space,

¹ Here to me the Spanish syntax seems ambiguous; for this verse ('Aunque así sea ingreso en esta réplica') could also be construed, "Though so it be, I enter into this replica" etc.)

cuyo umbral no traspaso
e igual como los otros
allá de ti me aparto muy temprano,
y arriconado quedas en un ángulo;
(pero acá estás en mí reproducido).

V
Pues nunca más te vuelvo las espaldas,
y como en el pasado ambos estamos
en la cuna, en el cuarto, en la morada
bajo los dulces ojos maternas,
tal ligados por una fibra idéntica;
y la esfera fatal
y la esfera feliz
(la tuya y mía) se unen y es la casa
de papá y mamá, en cuya compañía
de nuevo como ayer, y así por siempre

whose sill I cannot cross
but equally with others
find myself separate from you very early,
and you stay in it, cornered, in an angle
(except that you are reproduced in me).

V
For never again do I turn my back on you,
and even as in the past, so now both of us
are in the crib, the room, the dwelling-place
beneath the sweet eyes of our mother, tied
there tightly by a thread identical;
and the fate-heavy sphere
and the felicitous
(your own, and mine) unite, and is the house
of Papa and Mama, in whose company,
as yesterday, so now, and so forever.

Taking Hold of Form that Moves ("Asir la forma que se va")

Some believe in Divinity solely through fear in the face of a possible nothingness. In the same way some adore artistic form in the face of their fear of what will end by disintegrating forever. But in this case anguish is not the only cause, for there is also a tacit devotion of the senses as old as the aesthetic objects themselves. That is the faith in form, not from fear of the void, but from the pure pleasure of enjoying it. This happens in the same way in which Divinity is adored for itself, and even if it does not exist. In truth it is not spurious and does not come from baroque or Parnassian decadents. There must be no shame on account of it. It must not be made to abase itself. To work in that way is nothing but disowning our container. For the bodies in which we dwell possess a contour, also a structure, where the secret vital organs are found in perfect order and agreement. Let us hold fast to it, as we hold fast to our bodily form in the face of inevitable death.

Taking Hold of Form that Moves and portions of the audio lecture are taken from "Notes on Carlos Germán Belli," published by the Spanish department at Harvard University, *Plaza: Revista de Literatura* 12, Spring 1987, p. 39-46.