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SANTIAGO DE CHILE: MAGO EDITORES, 2018.

BILINGUAL MEDITATIONS ON EVERYDAY PLEASURES

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Bilingual meditations on everyday pleasures

Francisca Folch Couyoumdjian

Edward González's debut poetry collection is a thought-provoking bilingual work that renders homage to the lands that shaped him: born in Cuba and raised in Miami, the poet now lives in Chile, claiming both English and Spanish as native tongues. The result is a deeply philosophical exploration of identity and the everyday pleasures of life.

The initial "10 minutos" opens the Spanish section, and sets the tone for the whole collection: the speaker is alone with his cigarette, brewing tea for someone else, contemplating the ten minutes that are his and to which he is also a slave. In this parenthetical moment, freedom and slavery to time seem ominously alike. "Comiendo papas fritas" is most representative of this first section of leisurely enjoyment: "la gente paga tanto por gozar / a mí me sale el precio de estas papas y dos cervezas," the speaker puts forth as axiom. He is in the present, enjoying the everyday, turning his thoughts inward and letting the hot oily fries warm him on a cold day. The lines strike quietly home for their wryly humorous approach: at its close, the speaker contemplates the more or less outlandish threats to this simple pleasure, and decides on a practical course of action to avert catastrophe: "tiro el último escurre de papita en la acera / hacienda sacrificios por adelantado" (14).

“Sin zapatos,” the Spanish title to the book, appears early on (its counterpart, “Shoes Off,” is the title of the English section). The tone here is intriguingly uncertain, half relaxed, half resigned; the speaker is barefoot, shirt untucked, belt unbuckled, semi-recumbent, sipping beer, and allowing whimsical images to come and go, effortlessly giving in to his surroundings:

yo soy un hombre que trató de entregar todo lo que tenía
y el mundo me dijo que me lo dejara
por eso estoy aquí sentado, pleno
relajado
marinando en la comodidad de la inercia
dejando preguntas para después. (19)

The weight of a sluggish body with a mind alert yet slow to act predominates in many poems as a deliberate life choice:

soy más flojo que los otros animales
tengo dinero para lidiar con el domador

¿pero qué más

qué más? (22)

ends the existential meditation of “jabalí en botella,” in which the speaker surveys a vivid menagerie of beer bottles for the meaning of life. In “mientras gira mi ventilador” the speaker lounges at a slow-paced cadence, conjuring fanciful images, not exactly of decay, although there is talk of disintegration and cockroaches, while he waits for sleep to take over. In “no cacho” the idea of shoes as shackles for the feet is explicit, and delightfully tongue-in-cheek, with the speaker complaining, half in jest:

los zapatos como pies falsos
como cascos para la guerra de caminar
odio los zapatos por ser falsos y necesarios
por no poder llegar a un acuerdo con los pisos. (36)

Ever-present as a motif is the smoke of cigarettes, which permeates many of the poems, sometimes to highlight their literal pleasure, sometimes to summon memories that appear from drag to drag, sometimes even as metaphor for ghostly dreams. In the haunting “humo” the speaker seeks to reaffirm his sense of being, filling out the gaps of his body with smoke:

soy un idioma vivo
con semblanzas por crear
con acentos por resonar
y sufijos que añadir y prefijos que despojar. (28)

González’s linguistic expertise and teaching experience come through in these lines, his academic considerations adding weight and specificity to the lyricism of the images. This, one of his most moving poems, summons a lost father figure: “he hecho tantas cosas sin ti” (29) the speaker mourns as he traces in his mind the thread of smoke that has shaped his own history,

yo soy el cigarro y tú la ceniza
yo quemando
y tú ya
quemado. (31)

Smoking here becomes a catalyst for remembrance and an invocation of the future. In other poems, smoking is a full time activity, so much so that one is reminded of Oscar Wilde’s description of it as the “perfect pleasure;” and of his Lady Bracknell’s peremptory notions regarding the importance of smoking, given that “A man should always have an occupation of some sort.”

Access to another is often granted through the senses; aside from smoking, eating and drinking figure prominently as a means to kindle reverie; in “abierta,” eating a package of salted almonds becomes a surprisingly sensual affair: “abro mi boca y con mi lengua trazo / los surcos de la almendra un poco más lento / que la velocidad del mundo” (47). The lines offer a personal version of slow food, one that has to do with enjoying the other as a version of one’s actively erotic recollection. In this vein, praising everyday talents becomes a form of love. “Pelando tomates” thus invokes the dainty, circumspect deftness of kitchen skills:

circulas su roja cobertura
en un lento desvestir
una forma tierna de matar
tan preciso, sin ensayo. (49)

In “close,” from the second section of the collection, the aural and gustatory imagery becomes almost tangible as the “the singer kisses the mic / . . . licks the single-scoop head” (80-1), turning concert-going into a graphic sexual act. Sex is also present when considering the nuances of language production, nowhere more effectively than in “pronouncing naked,” where the speaker wonders at how “there aren’t a lot of vowels in sex / maybe [f] / maybe all the consonants involving lips and teeth” (99).

The second part, written in English, abounds in such cultural references: tributes to the rhythmic infectiousness of Thomas Sayers Ellis and to the linguistic experimentation of “the later poet of e.e. cummings” are explicit, while “if” invites a Kipling comparison, and toys with a Whitman-like embodied speaker that hypnotizes with repeated anaphoric alternatives, mulling over the paths a life can take:

whistling a cappella, with no ifs ands or buts
grinding the cigarette carcass with my heel

pivoting

trying to leave a mark. (65)

The mark this collection leaves is provocatively simple. Through insightful and sharply vivid observations, in a state of apparent inertia, the speaker successfully invites us to appreciate the small luxuries of life. It is not coincidental that many of the latter poems also bring more family-oriented themes, like the tenderness of a child attempting to sing yellow “SOhmadin” (55), in which the joyful stress of the syllable jumps up vibrantly at the reader. The imaginative quirkiness of childhood that appears in the eclectic final section includes poems that invoke Gonzalez’s daughters, also dedicatees of the collection. “Ina” and “Olivia” emerge as figures within an evanescent dreamland of fatherly

observations: one is “an alien visitor / from a cotton candy planet” (128), the other, a “petit gardener” (131). “Four shadows” closes the collection on an endearing note, as the speaker takes a lingering look at family and ancestral roots that bring all his different worlds together.

Edward Gonzalez’s poetic voice is unpretentious and wonderfully accurate, its bilingualism apparent almost exclusively as separate sections in the book—Pablo Saavedra is credited as translator and collaborator for the Spanish part. In the backcover, María Inés Zaldívar praises this debut as “[un] libro nada de novato,” adding that it is a poetry “que busca fijar residencia . . . a través de una galería de objetos, situaciones y vivencias diarias donde la materialidad de las cosas se volatiliza, y las ideas y sentimientos toman cuerpos tangibles y concretos.”

Having recently attended an open mic event in which González performed a rap ode to English phonetics—a delightfully humorous piece with a catchy rhythm that was warmly received, I would venture to state that the poet will branch out in other directions, and that his poetic range might emerge in other, perhaps more audiovisual formats. The epigrammatic wisdom of the opening stanza in the poem “adding and subtracting” sums up the spirit of this enjoyable collection, which will most certainly not be his last. If one does not smoke or delight in beer or savour oily chips or hate wearing shoes, there is always the charm of the speaker’s simple philosophy:

I take less
stress less
wear less
and do less—
I’d rather waste a day than have it spoil. (84)

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