

ROSALÍA DE CASTRO

FROM NEW LEAVES

TRANSLATED BY ERÍN MOURE

**

You write some verses and... what verses!
Never seen anything like them:
each line armed with pebbles,
knuckledusters every one,
as if they're made for thwacking
those who read them in the nose.

WOE

Why's it exist? Who is it? Where's its proud
home? Artful, how does it thrive?
Light sleep or passing cloud
is all it is for many, hardly leaves a trace.
Others feel its perfidious blows
lay siege to them with dark treachery
from start to end of life's slaving.
But they never see it, though they look
all round to avoid it; how many are there
who never feel its pestilent breath
in air or space, nor on earth nor on the sea,
though it's everywhere, ever damaging.

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Evil is the child of hell, good that of heaven;
whose is woe? She-wolf
never sated, who redoubles her furor
on sighting a deep and bloody wound.
Where's it come from? What's it want? Why'd you let it,
mighty Maker, when you see us suffer?
Can't you tell, Lord, that its power suffocates
faith and love, in the spirit that'd faith in you?
How it hardens a heart that once
was every softness! How it kills
light in hope, so that hope's peaceful gleam
amid the stars is struck from existence,
light that lent new strength to tired feet
and renewed courage in the timorous soul!
All rots in its passage, its damned plaint
chokes everything forever:
it sticks its muck to everything.
And what a deep pit it digs around
whomever it pursues! How folk
flee from it so as to block the laments

its pain provokes, or the frightening
blasphemy that with trembling lip
it pronounces, biting!
No pestilence exists in life
that causes so much human horror
as it does to those touched by woe.

And why not, if good turns its back,
if even sun does not shine where woe lives,
if the tap that gives water daily
is poisoned, if even bread tastes
of dry nothing in the mouth, and endless sea
instantaneously goes dry
if woe wants to drown in its harsh waves;
as for the arms of death that weary it,
even death leaves woe alone!

Take pity, Lord! Bar the shadow
that keeps casting eternal night
over the light of faith, love and hope!
Horrible shadow that obscures
shining stars in the heavens, that's made
new hell in this world, and a new world
where all courage loses its zeal
and all strength shatters without struggle,
where the long dark of pitilessness
bars every path that leads forward.

Kind Maker, with your potent breath,
dispel this horrible phantasm from us
and let woe come to an end;
enough already of aches, of wretched
weak flesh and of infallible death,
that torment and punish those sad ones who
having gone wrong, live banished
from the exalted home for which they sigh!¹

NOT IN THE DARK!

I

—All's dark, shadows couch the pathway,
and not even heaven has eyes, nor pine woods tongues.

Let's go! Who knows the depth of what's hidden?
There's no soul who knows! Come! Night's dark.

—Dark? But there's a glow of some treacherous light...
—It's a star that glows in roiling waters.

—And don't you hear something rustle in the grass?
—It's the wind gone crazy, twirling foliage.

—Listen, I feel footsteps, and some shape hulks there...
—If it's alive, we'll kill it; it won't talk if it's dead!

—But here, by this headland, there's a deep hole:
come on, and saint or devil, we'll see what finds us there.

II

And where'm I heading? Where'll I hide?
So that no one sees me and I see no one.

The light of day startles me, starlight astonishes me.
And men's stares penetrate my very soul.

And it's that whatever is inside me, can be seen
on my face, just as tides deliver up their dead, at last.

If it be so, then let it be seen....! but no: I bear you
inside me: terrifying phantasm of my remorse!²

**

—You claim that marriage
is blessed and good. So be it,
but Saint Anthony³ never wed,
even though the very devil
tried to get him to try.

As many hairshirts as possible, yes,
and heaps of penance;
but I notice that no saint wished
to shoulder the heavy cross
of the married.

Not even the holy fathers,
of whose scriptures we have plenty,
along with all their hallelujahs,
wanted to sink their holy feet
into that kind of muck.

From every angle,
matrimony, you're a noose;
you're a temptation to hell,
but I'll get married..., for winter's coming...
I need someone to warm my feet!

WHAT'S UP?

Always a plaintive *oh!*, a qualm,
a desire, an anguish, an ache...
At times it's a star that dazzles,
at others it's a ray of sun;
it's the leaves that fall from trees,
then it's flowers that burst in fields,
 and it's the wind that moans;
 and it's the cold, and heat...
And it's neither wind nor sun, nor is it the cold;
 it's not..., no it's just
the soul assailed, poetic and sensitive,
 all lashed by disappointment
 railing at everything.

NOTES

1) Rosalía de Castro's reflections on *desgracia* merit note. This title in Galician translates, in one sense, to what it looks like: *disgrace*. Un-grace. Un-lightness, if grace is lightness as it is in the word 'graceful.' In fact, Rosalía de Castro speaks of what we today call depression. I titled 'Desgracia' in English as 'Woe' rather than depression, to widen the register of the title word a bit, yet to make a link with depressive illness, which often is exacerbated by the social. Rosalía's passionate social ire is evident in this poem, and it is no plaint, for even if depression touched her deeply (during the period she wrote these poems, there were political and familial and health setbacks), she was able to rise to speak, which many cannot. The struggle in Rosalía de Castro marks not simply melancholy but a steady rage. She touches and acknowledges a wrenched hole in the social and personal fabric and she does not draw back. Depression in her era had no pharmaceutical alleviation. Then, as today, women were more prone to it, or more prone to admit to it and admit to treating it. It's no coincidence that an early anti-depressant, Valium, was known as 'Mother's Little Helpers.' From market entry in 1963 to the end of patent in 1985, it was a top-selling drug in America. Along with it, drugs such as Quaaludes, marketed as a sleeping potion, found their way into our bloodstream as anxiety-repressants, and turned out to worsen depression and suicidal thoughts, further degrading the lives of women. In our time, the pharmacology of depression treatment is more sophisticated, but it still remains that depression, *desgracia*, is often an offshoot of societal precarity. The World Health Organization (WHO) has predicted that by 2020, major depressive illness will be second only to heart disease as the world's leading cause of disability. De Castro was ahead of her time. I don't think there's any poet in any language active in the nineteenth century who more clearly addressed depression as a women's and human health issue, as an issue provoked by migration and precarity.

2) The dialogue of the fleeing couple. Rosalía wrote a lot of women trying to assume their independence; in reality, this often meant fleeing their families in the company of a suit-or undesirable or impossible otherwise. In the first poem the scene is described from outside, and we see but the shadow of the border guard along the Miño (the river that forms

the border between Galicia and Portugal) and of his gun, signifying his readiness to kill. In the two-part second poem, the dialogue of the fleeing couple in the first part is taken up in the second part by the woman's frightened voice alone; the man's voice is absent. The poems work eerily together; we too are in the dark. Is the man dead and the woman found out and brought back?

3) Saint Anthony of Padua is saint of marriages and of reconciliation of couples. His feast day is in June, considered the month of marriages. An anti-clerical poem for it makes light of the holiness of wedlock, finding only one good reason for getting married: warmth for cold feet!

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