

A Note on the Poetry of Luis Muñoz

“This hour, offended if flattered, keeps an odd art.”

Attentiveness in poetry is more than mere precision or clarity; it attains powers of possession. The watcher in a poem doesn't just present the object to us, he charges it, and thereby *changes* it. A magnetic field is created between the two. So, when a reader finds lines like, “I follow men and study them as if I were searching for a pulse,” one knows right away one is in the presence of a real poet.

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Luis Muñoz tells us who we are by pointing to our absences (“I have made myself a soul mate of absence.”) He is the investigator of that hardest thing: the quiet moment. If the best cure for loneliness is solitude, as Marianne Moore taught us, then here a *carnivale* opens up inside a moment of quiet and “solitude chooses a car / that dissolves the night's slight provinces.”

But if this book is the theater, then the flies and tree roots and “the flight of the last gulls” are its actors. A rare passerby visits the “streets that know their way by heart” and the theater of solitude comes alive and lights up “the wound struck by a song / that comes too close.” It is in such moments that a true poet is tested: not when there are a myriad of images or wild ecstatic possibilities, but when the colors are few and there are no objects to hide the false note behind.

Does Luis Muñoz's poetry pass this test in English? I say yes. This book is beautiful because “the sea never suggests nostalgia.” Because “afternoon threads are sewn without the afternoon.” Because even if “someone on the street calls out, / announces roses on sale,” in that street we see “the heat pumping out of July.” And if it is Sunday – “its port clamor is strewn with fish scales.” Everyone will find a different solitary theater on these pages. I, for one, couldn't stop rereading poems like *Wool Blankets*, *Translating at Night*, *Welder*, *Breathing*, *Antonio Machado*, *Parallel Lives*, *Flies Stuck to the Window Glass*, *Greetings*.

It is this attentiveness that allows Muñoz to achieve the most acrobatic feats by the simplest of means. Note how this poem, which begins as a dialogue, a portrait of another person, becomes a self-portrait, a solitary theater, an argument with one's body, perhaps, and all the while remains an object poem, a brief ode to *Wool Blankets*:

WOOL BLANKETS

No, I want to be awake, he says,

wrapped inside the foaming blankets
poems sew around the world,
when I offer him a glass.

Now I am embarrassed to want to sleep,
and that I am no longer thirsty,
and that I have a premonition of cold.

While there are no loud manifestos in those poems, a revolution happens inside the nation of one person's chest, and is far more radical than one may first suspect. The revelation comes gradually (for this reader, at least), with the "awareness of brevity." This poet, this "misguided beast," always "looks at death / out of the corner of" his eye.

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So how is this poet able to pull off such lyric levity, such muscle in the lightest of moments, such fireworks in the barest of landscapes? What is his secret?

What I find of most interest in Muñoz is how alive, how immediate, how lyrical his understanding of time is. There is a long European tradition of poets whose lyricism—either purposefully, or by accident—leads to an investigation of the phenomena of time. From the ages-old Christian books of hours, to Rilke's *Book of Hours* for the twentieth century, to Auden's hard-fought (and often struggling) belief that "Time worships language and forgives everyone by whom it lives." One thinks of Montale's slow delicacy of the moment; one thinks of Sinigaglia's and Penna's playful stillness of a moment, of Joseph Brodsky's restless search for the "window on the properties of time."

Luis Muñoz understands this search. He is obsessed with the "day's delicate structure"; he watches how the night "soaks" into a man, and "fills out" a man's "arms, / the cotton" of a man's "chest, the pouch of" his tongue. In Muñoz's lyrics, "the minutes pass" over "someone sleeping...like a pendulum, / like a pendulum." There is an endless astonishment with how "the teeth of chance fit / into the notches of the day." His meditation on time takes various shapes; it is metamorphic. In a poem such as *Translating at Night*, we have a chance to observe a three-way conversation: Bauer gives us an English version of Muñoz's Spanish version of Ungaretti's Italian lyric. In the final lines the meditative tone achieves heat, passion in syntax, and the tone changes; while it remains quiet, the silence picks up speed, offers play:

This hour, offended if flattered,
keeps an odd art.

Isn't it autumn's first
solo appearance?
And here, with no more mystery,
it rushes to gold
and beautiful time robs

madness of its grace.

All the same I would shout, all the same:
you, quick youth of the senses,
who keep me in the dark about myself
and indulge immortality with images,

don't leave me, suffering, wait.

And if Muñoz speaks of evening hours, reader, and of how their “names flutter about you / when you are alone,” it is because these are the innermost hours of the soul Dickinson warned us of.

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Luis Muñoz is a rare real soul; he sees how the poet slips “the charred seaweed and red grit / into the frayed lining of his pocket of good moments.” He notices that poetry describes things by their opposites, that magic is deep inside the real, that the branch doesn't crack though he steps on it. Clarity is the first mystery, Darwish told us. This poem is well aware of that simple fact, and greets it in each moment:

GREETINGS

Hello, unreality,
sand storm in my head
and its revolving hourglasses.
The day's problems from a distance
like small handfuls of peas.
The branch that doesn't crack if I step on it,
the sip of boiling coffee that doesn't burn.

Hello, parentheses,
hello, touch that doesn't arrive,
hello, strip of air or light
or insulation of hours—
this is still pending between us.

Muñoz's tender attentiveness to moments, to roots, to flies, made me think often of Machado, particularly of that great lyric, “The Eyes.” As in Machado, the grief and the silences in this book are animal-like, tender creatures. And sadness? It clings to “days / like a thin transparent skin of silk.” Muñoz's beautiful lyric, *Antonio Machado*, pays a moving homage to the elder poet, yes—but also shows us Muñoz's own *ars poetica*, exposes us to the pain that earns that quiet moment, that theater of one. And, if pain

comes, if a theater of grief opens, then perhaps the moments are our very warnings, our companions:

ANTONIO MACHADO

He scraped against the white-hot walls of hell
every chance the pain gave him.

He slipped the charred seaweed and red grit
into the frayed lining of his pocket
of good moments.

There they were remedy, repellent,
warning and companionship.

Reading this I want to ask if there is tenderness in hell also—after all, how can *anything* exist in God’s creation without some tenderness? Perhaps Muñoz means to say precisely that, for on his pages, if silence comes—however hellish, however unforgiving—it is still “dear silence.” This delicacy, this tenderness and attentiveness don’t slow us down. Instead, they show us the great whirlwind, the unbelievable speed inside our own pauses. Here, even breathing in and breathing out offer their largesse:

BREATHING

Like the pith around a piece of fruit
or the bound parcels of the clouds,
memory breathes like an invisible world.

From the outside it doesn’t exist, or is only silence.

From the inside it is a going forth of bulldozers,
of charged cells, of ant soldiers
shifting in disarray.

This, reader, is what beauty means, what wisdom stands for. It comes without great fanfare, but it stays with you, faithful as the breathing itself. And if sadness comes again? Then “sadness is high and airy / like whipped ocean foam.”

Ilya Kaminsky