

SAMPLER

Nettles

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Luisa Futoransky

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translated from Spanish

by

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Introduction

Inveterate traveller since her earliest wanderings, Luisa Futoransky draws from a deep well. A long-distance poet, she listens to the world with the instincts of a diviner, ready to cull its ineffable moments and render them in a few lines where they will bloom again. Like a Chinese ink painter, with the merest of means and a free hand she sketches ancient histories, migrations, tales of hope and heartbreak, and word by word—exact, deliberate, chosen words—brings us to the point of insight. Her poems stand us upright somehow amid the dizzying swirl of existence, even as they reflect the many places she has known.

I first met Luisa soon after she landed in Paris some 35 years ago, where she still lives. Often I marvelled at how she got along: not that poetry meant a vow of poverty, not quite, but from her modest employments, the occasional grants and invitations, the humble abode that was her home, she learned to spin a kind of gold; richer than gold, more enduring, made with just what was at hand, small nothings, words. It took me a long time to appreciate the distillation that was going on. Her erudition, then as now, she wore lightly and the humour with which she faced every reversal and revelation had a seasoned quality that seemed well earned.

But where did she come from, and how did she gain such fluency with the ways of the world? Born and raised in Buenos Aires, from an Eastern European Jewish immigrant family, she studied music and literature and received her law degree from the university there. During the 1960s, after working under Borges at the national library, she travelled extensively throughout Latin America and left Argentina permanently in 1971, when she was a guest at the Iowa Writers Workshop. Following that, she lived in Spain and Rome, with several visits to Israel, and for four years taught opera in Japan. In the late 1970s, she moved to Beijing, working in the Spanish language bureau of the Chinese state radio. From there, in 1981, she moved to Paris.

For most of her first dozen years in Paris, she worked as an art museum guard at the Centre Pompidou. Eventually she found a position at the Agence France Presse, part of a venerable tradition among Latin American writers in Paris. Another decade and a half, she reached mandatory retirement age, though she continues to write, edit, and translate for UNESCO's magazine. And all the while, of course, every couple of years,

she published another book. Next year, her publisher in Buenos Aires, Leviatán, will bring out her collected poems, fifty-plus years after her first book.

Luisa established herself initially as a poet with several books in the '60s and '70s. After settling in Paris she took up prose as well. Since then, five novels and two non-fiction books (on hair and honeymoons) have appeared, along with at least fifteen books of poetry. She is a poet of lived experience above all, though not hers alone; other voices inhabit the work, whether of friends, lovers, fellow travellers (people she met or figures from history and literature). Like the poetry, her fiction employs a direct language rooted in anecdote and reflection, while sometimes delighting in playful experimentalism. Hers are mosaic narratives, made of pieces, fragments.

Something else to notice in *Nettles* is her flair for the theatrical, especially acute when she writes in shorter forms. Surely her studies of opera helped to hone her instinct for the dramatic gesture. But to think that we start in Rome with this book only to end up in Ohio. That is some sense of humour.

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JASON WEISS

translator of Luisa Futoransky's

The Duration of the Voyage: selected poems

(Junction Press, New York, 1997)

ORTIGAS

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NETTLES

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Jubileo romano

Ocre, rosa, naranja enigmas,
sabores romanos
que el cuerpo revisita
deleitándose en jirones de antiguos sobresaltos
y repentinas languideces

sin violencia el sol te acompaña la jornada
y por la noche discutimos la transparencia
en la poesía de Mario Luzi
o la intensidad minuciosa del dolor en Umberto Saba

los voluntarios del jubileo suben y jadean escalinatas
con chalecos de fuerza azul índigo
y ribetes amarillos de justa deportiva
de espaldas a cuanto corre
o se estanca en el légamo del Tíber

gladiadores de cartón piedra
nuevos restoranes
de incierta sonrisa y calidad
y tanto *buona sera*
Roma, la sardónica
tan fiel en amistad

Roman Jubilee

Ochre, rose, orange
riddles, Roman flavours
that the body rediscovers
taking delight in the remnants of ancient upheavals
and sudden languor

without violence the sun accompanies your day
and in the evening we discuss transparency
in the poetry of Mario Luzi
or the meticulous intensity of pain in Umberto Saba

volunteers of the jubilee puff and pant their way up staircases
in indigo straightjackets
trimmed like sportswear with yellow ribbon
their backs turned to where life flows
or stagnates in the Tiber's silt

papier-mâché gladiators
new restaurants
of an uncertain smile and quality
and so much *buona sera*
sardonic Rome
so loyal in friendship

A las butacas semi vacías
de un cine al aire libre llegan
los lamentos de los tarantulados del Cilento
las canciones en guikro
un cantautor mañoso y ronco
trashumantes, los saltimbanquis recorren la península
las mesas, los vinos, los adioses
los hoteles y sudores de una noche
¿para ya no más volver?

montaña con montaña no podrán acercarse
pero la gente que es tan pero tan pequeña
quién sabe sí

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Into the half-empty seats
of an open-air cinema
enter the convulsions of tarantula-like dancers from Cilento
songs in *guikro*
a hoarse and wily singer
roving jugglers make their way along the peninsula
tables, wines, goodbyes
hotels and the fever of a one night stand
to never again return?

one mountain can never get any closer to another
but people, who are so very small
perhaps might, who knows

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mariposas amarillo acidulado
 diminutas
 otras más negro que siena
 tiesas, grandes, muy recamadas
 pero que siempre cabrán en la palma
 que jamás osará cazarlas
 que no es tarea de buena gente
 andar cortando alas

van y vienen entre campanillas azul intenso
 con grutas al fondo
 por donde nace infancia
 con gotas nuevas de rocío
 todavía

irse de aquí con el *corpo feixado*
 en un buen trabajo de hechicero pernambucano
 que me haga impune a los dolores
 pero no invisible
 ni tampoco piedra

alma la mi alma
 dame la mano
 que más allá del Tíber
 no respondo
 dame tregua
 de una vez

tiny
 acidic yellow butterflies
 others blacker than Siena
 stiff, large, very embroidered
 but that always fit inside the palm
 that will never dare hunt them
 it's not the task of good people
 to go around clipping wings

they come and go between the bluebells
 caves in the background
 where childhood is reborn
 still covered
 with drops of fresh morning dew

to leave here with *corpo feixado*¹
 from a good spell cast by a Pernambucan shaman
 may it render me immune against the pains
 although not invisible
 or made of stone

soul of my soul
 lend me your hand
 for beyond the Tiber
 I do not respond
 grant me a truce
 once and for all

¹ *corpo feixado* literally means 'closed body', used in a supernatural sense as a means of making the body impervious to evil or harm.

Con los dedos

qué se espera de un viejo? que pida turno con especialistas
que le confirmarán por si falta le hacía
el deterioro irremediable

que mate el tiempo
que sus deseos como él se jubilen sin júbilo de la vida del paso y el respiro
sus allegados, la ciudad, se vengan de sus antiguas perrerías y petulancia
le multiplican escaleras
veredas jabonosas
apenas con un alfiler
un martillito de viento le quiebran la dentadura postiza
en el lavabo del hotel
y para rematarla los duendes de la noche la tiran por la ventana
y el vecindario se queja por ruidos molestos
intempestivos
joder con los viejos
hay quien dice que huelen tan mal como los linyeras
o los muros de las prisiones
porque el olor de una clase de adolescentes en verano
voltea marea

distinto

With the Fingers

what can be expected of an old boy? That he books an appointment with
specialists
merely for them to confirm his irredeemable deterioration
as if he really needed to be told

that he's killing time
that his desires like him are retiring without rapture from a life of stepping
forth and drawing breath
his kin, the city, take revenge for his dirty old tricks and petulance

stairs multiply in front of him
soapy pavements
barely a pin
a little hammering of the wind break his dentures
in the hotel sink
and just to finish them off the night elves hurl them out of the window
and the neighbours complain about the unearthly racket
damn these old codgers
some say they smell as foul as tramps
or prison walls
because the stench of a class of adolescents in summertime
turns one's stomach

but in a different way