Nettles
Luisa Futoransky

Nettles

translated from Spanish
by
Philippa Page

Shearsman Books
Contents

Introduction 6

Jubileo romano 10
  Roman Jubilee 11
Con los dedos 16
  With the Fingers 17
Puchero 22
  Pauper’s Stew 23
Dolesme 24
  Hurt(s) me 25
Rueca con violácea 26
  Spinning Wheel with Violet 27
Sistema de sistemas 28
  System of Systems 29
Cotillón 30
  Cotillion 31
Excarificaciones 34
  Scarifications 35
Hora del lobo: reliquia andina 36
  Hour of the Wolf: Andean Relic 37
Amanece tormenta de julio en el balcón 38
  July Storm As Dawn Breaks on the Balcony 39
Ios, la chiquita 40
  Ios, the Little One 41
Érase, Belle Isle 42
  Once upon Belle Isle 43
Cielito lindo 50
  Cielito lindo 51

Crónicas / Chronicles

Cuarteto de Praga 66
  Prague Quartet 67
Ortigas de Saorge 82
  Nettles from Saorge 83
Gambier, Ohio 96
  Gambier, Ohio 97
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.

**JASON WEISS**

translator of Luisa Futoransky’s

*The Duration of the Voyage: selected poems*

(Junction Press, New York, 1997)
ORTIGAS

SAMPLER
NETTLES

SAMPLER
Jubileo romano

Ocre, rosa, naranja enigmas,
sabores romanos
que el cuerpo revisita
deleitándose en jirones de antiguos sobresaltos
y repentinadas 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 penínula
las mesas, los vinos, los adiós
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 si
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
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
an 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 los 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