

*The Mouth
of the Earth*

SAMPLER

ALSO BY MANUEL RIVAS

Poems

Libro do Entroido
Balada nas praias do Oeste
Mohicania
Ningún cisne
Costa da Morte Blues
O pobo da noite
Do descoñecido ao descoñecido
A desaparición da neve
Guindillasomiedo
A boca da terra

in English

From Unknown to Unknown
The Disappearance of Snow

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Todo ben
Un millón de vacas
Os comedores de patacas
En salvaxe compañía
Que me queres, amor?
Bala perdida
O lapis do carpinteiro
Ela, maldita alma
A man dos paños
As chamadas perdidas
Contos de Nadal
Os libros arden mal
Todo é silencio
O máis estraño. Contos reunidos
O heroe (play)
As voces baixas (autobiography)
O último día de Terranova
Contra todo esto

in English

The Carpenter's Pencil
Butterfly's Tongue
Vermeer's Milkmaid
Into the Wilderness
Books Burn Badly
The Potato Eaters
One Million Cows
All is Silence
The Low Voices

SAMPLER

Manuel Rivas

*The Mouth
of the Earth*

A boca da terra

translated from Galician
by Lorna Shaughnessy

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NUI Galway
OÉ Gaillimh

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Hearing Things: Tuning into Manuel Rivas's *The Mouth of the Earth*

LORNA SHAUGHNESSY

For Manuel Rivas, words are the most sensitive of creatures. In the same way that frogs or glow-worms are the first to manifest signs of pollution in the natural environment, words suffer as a result of corruption in the sociopolitical sphere. In his work as journalist, writer of fiction, poetry or essays, Rivas is consistent in his role as custodian of all sensitive creatures; his writings document historical damage and alert us to potential future harm to our natural, linguistic and political ecosystems. With the same level of attention that a naturalist dedicates to minute indicators of change – the briefest of absences, the apparently insignificant break of behavioural patterns in a micro-environment – Rivas observes the signs and listens to the sounds that emerge from the mouth of earth. Like all his literary publications, this collection of poems was written in Galician, and first published in 2015 by the Galician language publishing house, Xerais, as *A boca da terra*. It represents another contribution by Rivas to the linguistic ‘biodiversity’ of Spain that he believes should be protected by policy-makers as a precious resource, rather than regarded as a problem.

The voices that emerge from *The Mouth of the Earth* are many and varied, and the three sections of the book reflect what they have to tell us in different ways. In the first, ‘The Earth that Hides’, we encounter nature as terra incognita. Mystery and enigma are central to Rivas’s world view, and in their apprehension of nature these poems remind us of all we do not know, control or understand about the natural world that surrounds us. In the second section, ‘The Ohio Scales’, we observe the prints left behind by a wounded past and its wounded language; the *saudade* or yearning for lost meaning; the weight of dispossessed words balancing on the remembered shop scales of a Galician childhood. The final section, ‘Funeral Orations’, bears witness to lives cut tragically short through human injustice, but also celebrates the songs that sprout from the earth where they are buried, and above all, places trust in poetry’s resilience.

The Mouth of the Earth challenges the reader to observe the world more closely, because it is precisely the things that are not immediately visible or audible that matter most in these disturbing times of endangered species, languages and histories. Invisibility has long been a concern of this poet. It is not uncommon for the reader of his poetry to experience a slow

revelation of what was previously unseen, and simultaneously, a gradual disappearance of surface or assumed realities. One of his earlier poetry collections bears the title, *A desaparición da neve* (*The Disappearance of Snow*). We encounter immanent realities and unknown territories: a star that the night itself is not aware of; knowledge shared only between Jesus and Judas, like a secret joke; a poem that hides like a furtive creature inside the poet. Much of the earth that speaks to us here can only be glimpsed fleetingly, like the man who deserts the fog and is spotted through a train window, or the teardrop that evaporates in Antofagasta; or in the final poem, 'Singer and Minerva', that unique historical moment of cultural flowering and political hope that Galicia saw in the 1930s, truncated by the outbreak of the Civil War and the centralist policies of Franco's dictatorship. We discover that in both nature and history, the throbbing 'pain of the invisible' persists where injury has not been witnessed or has been forgotten. Such is its palpable presence in this book that 'History' is frequently capitalised by the poet. We repeatedly meet examples of a once visible past that has disappeared through human intervention, like the river Monelos that used to flow through the city of A Coruña, now channeled underground. However, in Rivas's world the disappeared and invisible are never wholly absent. Echoes of the past resonate through time and landscape, to a point where past and place become inseparable in 'Mother's Mountain'. Elsewhere, the equal weight and elusiveness of the past are captured in the delicate balancing mechanism of the 'Ohio' weighing scales. Rivas exposes the impossibility of quantifying the things that matter most, things that lie just beneath the surface, the non or not-quite manifest. Many of the poems poke fun at our absurd attempts to render them measurable, to weigh a lost sign of the zodiac or a strategic move in a game of chess; to parcel up a pinch of matured nothing, a kilo of hunger.

Rivas's poetry responds to the unseen by looking more closely at the wake of what has passed, or by peering long and hard into the fog of the present, ready to catch sight of what may emerge. Similarly, it responds to the inaudible by listening harder for sounds that may break through the surface noise of the present. Silence, for Rivas, can be either a blessing or a curse. It can indicate the presence of suppression and censorship, as in the poem 'The Mouth of the Earth', where the clay tells its part in the story of those buried in mass graves during and after the Spanish Civil War; or 'The Lovers', where lesbian school teachers cross the Atlantic disguised as a heterosexual married couple; or the story of how nuclear waste dumps were uncovered thanks to the courage and tenacity of a Galician skipper in

'Atlantic Trench'. But equally important are the positive silences of listening and reflection that we find in poems such as 'Inuit', where a woman's barely audible whispers can 'stitch a long, luminous and incomprehensible word', and the realisation in 'Man de Deus' that just as the lark hovers in the sky, suspended from its song, the poet hangs from his silence – temporarily airborne – at once still and in motion, steady and unfixed.

The 'Funeral Orations' that conclude the collection are this poet's response to historical silence. Rivas has described memory as a source of both nostalgia and future, and it has been a predominant theme in all his writing. Both his fiction and journalism have made significant contributions to sustaining the focus on 'historical memory' in public debate in Spain. These orations recover stories unsung by official histories. In the opening poem of the section, 'The Mouth of the Earth', the earth lends its voice to the project of recording tragic histories it did not choose to witness. In the second, 'The Gypsy Basketweavers', ghostly sounds of vibrating wicker rods resonate at the site where the gypsies were killed. Even the boots of a young insurgent have a chance to speak. These many voices remind us that the human capacity for cruelty and destruction can surpass our political and moral capacity to control it. They warn us against complacency and the danger of sleepwalking into an abyss, whether as a result of militarism, extreme nationalism or fear of 'the other'. They tell us that the consequences of poor political judgement in the past can have long-term effects for our political and natural environments. However, in their determination to listen to other voices and their particular form of ecological animism, these funeral orations are not without hope. There are many voices still to be heard, the book suggests, and many languages to learn before we can truly comprehend some of the recurring utterances picked up by Rivas's antennae, like the whinnying of absent or imagined horses, for example, or the trembling, stammering voice of 'a mother tongue at a bird's wake'. It is his desire to capture some of these barely perceptible voices that drives these poems to keep reaching for expression that goes beyond superficial explanation, to take the reader into areas of human experience where meaning appears not to coagulate or crystallise into familiar metaphor; experiences at times so traumatic they appear to defy expression. If one language will not fit the task, Rivas urges us to look to others, as these poems do, and strive to communicate in new ways, using the many tongues available to us through the mouth of the earth.

SAMPLER

For my Crosswinds companions.

SAMPLER

Wir Wandernde

Unsere Wege ziehen wir als Gepäck hinter uns her –

Mit einem Fetzen des Landes darin wir Rast hielten

Sind wir bekleidet –

Aus dem Kochtopf der Sprache, die wir unter Tränen erlernten,
Ernähren wir uns.

—Nelly Sachs, 'Chor der Wandernden' (1946)

We wanderers

Drag the path we have come like a suitcase behind us –

Dress

In a rag of the land we pause in –

Feed

From the stew-pot of language we learnt through our tears.

—Nelly Sachs, 'Chorus of the Wanderers' (1946)

I

THE EARTH THAT HIDES

Inda outra muita terra se te
esconde até venha tempo
de mostrar-se.

So much of the earth
still hides from you
until the time comes to reveal itself.

—Luis de Camões, *The Lusiads*

SAMPLER

Restless Paradise

And now, night, go into town,
Find three more young men,
Carry back on your shoulders
The coffin of the moon
And from the earth that hides itself
Hear the whinnying
Of the untamed colours of horses.

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The Man Who Deserted the Fog

Melancholy speed
That hides nothing of its past,
Land that peers
Through train windows
In search of the man who deserted the fog.

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The Holy Tree

Mutilated tree,
Memory of the lightning-bolt
That killed then died,
Where ravens perch,
Blaspheming
With the hoarse echo of church bells.

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Mother's Mountain

My mother left me
A piece of mountain
I've never been to see,
Always putting off
The day I would claim it.
But the unknown land
Cocks its ear to listen
And has a mouth,
Knows who I am,
Speaks to me.
They say it's nothing, really,
A bit of scrub
And an old pine,
Wounded,
That the lightning split.
So now I own
Some sky as well,
The wind's torn flesh
And a blazing flash
Buried,
Plunged head first
Into my plot
With angelic spite.
My inheritance thickens
To the sound
Of soldiers who passed
Through this corner of the globe,
Englishmen fleeing
From the French,
A wounded soldier
Drinking their warm blood,
Pilgrims who passed,
The hungry
Who gnawed on a log of shadow.

SAMPLER

And those mute girls
Who stood,
Arms outstretched,
So birds could perch there.
All of it mine.
Mine and no-one else's.
They say it with a touch of scorn,
Yours,
All yours,
Night and day.
The land,
The split tree,
An angel's sword
Beneath a sea of thorns,
The murmur of history,
A spring of warm blood,
The whole world
The size of a reed-nest
Resting on the outstretched arm
Of a silent girl.
I've never been.
It's where I come from,
I carry it inside.
Hidden,
The land,
Inside
I hide.