Floating Lanterns
Also by Mercedes Roffé from Shearsman Books

Like the Rains Come: Selected Poems (1987-2006)
Mercedes Roffé

Floating Lanterns

translated from Spanish by

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Things that leave us speechless:
Mercedes Roffé’s Floating Lanterns

In the beginning there was Goodness.
And from it, all things.
Epilogue, Floating Lanterns


When Las linternas flotantes was published in 2009, Mercedes Roffé explained that the book was “a reaction to things that left us speechless: September 11, Argentina’s economic debacle that led to long months of national and individual hardship and incertitude, the tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, and so many things that seemed to come together in just a few years, things that were so disastrous for the whole world.”¹ Like Jeremiah, the prophet of the Book of Lamentations, who mourns the destruction of Jerusalem through the use of acrostics, dirge and communal lament, Roffé, of Sephardic Jewish origins, attends to these “things that left us speechless” through elegy and meditation. In Hebrew, Jeremiah’s biblical text is called Eicha,

¹ Conversation with Mercedes Roffé, Manhattan, 2009.
(איכה,’יך), which means “alas” and “how.” An exclamation of grief’s unwieldy dimensions along with the need to grapple with its perplexing causes, *eicha* is the sentiment that grounds *Las linternas flotantes*. And for Roffé, like the prophet, poetic forms hold the unique capacity to engage these sentiments and ask *how* such catastrophic events come to happen.

But September 11, 2001, Argentina’s crisis that same year and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, were ultimately no worse than the other Latin and North American disasters that preceded them. Roffé, who moved to Manhattan in 1995, had lived through her country’s Dirty Wars (1976-1983), in which anyone identified as a “subversive” was targeted by a series of military juntas. Tens of thousands of individuals—pregnant women, children, labour and political leaders, doctors, Jews, clergy, students, human rights activists and intellectuals—were detained, tortured and “disappeared”.

Indeed, just when young Spanish writers were emerging hopeful from over thirty years of Franco’s military regime, a wave of coordinated dictatorships, supported by the United States and its economic allies, swept through much of Latin American in the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s. Poets from the Southern Cone such as Mario Benedetti (1920-2009), Juan Gelman (1930-2014), María del Carmen Colombo (b. 1950) and Raúl Zurita (b. 1950), to name only a few among many, searched for language techniques that might speak as much to the local, immediately apparent atrocities, as to the hemispheric conditions that either made such atrocities possible or managed to circumvent their forces. While one of Roffé’s earliest texts, *Cámara baja*, addresses the ethical urgency of those years, it was the timing of this recent series of events that incited her to focus on evil, *el mal*, as that which precedes and even undergirds economic, political, religious, scientific or natural explanations for catastrophes. But how do we speak of things that come before language and actually foreclose our use of it?

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Roffé sought language registers and techniques evocative of creation myths, sacred texts, philosophy and poetry that meditates upon human nature and our propensity for evil. She brings together Buddhism, Tibetan Yoga, the Judeo-Christian Bible, the Kabbalah, Plato’s *Republic*, T.S. Eliot, Beat poetry—particularly that of Anne Waldman—the oral traditions of Medieval Spain and Native North American cosmogonies. What binds these diverse materials is Roffé’s use of anaphora. Note, for example, the effects of “To sleep” and “To inhabit” in this opening poem:

To sleep with eyes wide open  
To sleep alert  
Standing, forehead propped against the day’s hinge  
*To inhabit the night wholly in the pure presence of the letter*  
Aleph Beth Yod  
the mark the trace-cipher  
To inhabit the night entirely in vigil  
To inhabit the night wholly insomniac  
To inhabit life wholly wakeful  

because to feel is more than seeing but even more so is to merge

Anaphora emphasizes meaning in the repetition of a word or concept. However, as each word is repeated, it lets meaning go, allowing the word to materialize in such a way that it bears sound more fully. Thus, we are moved from the word as something that signifies a particular or many concepts, to the word as sound, a relationship that fuses the materiality of the utterance with our own bodies. This is how anaphora creates tension that underscores the individual letter sounds—the building-blocks of language—at the same time that it foregrounds the promise of meaning. Through anaphora Roffé thus recalls the process of

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3 Transcript of “Oh mentida joya, la palabra,” Esther Ramón and Pilar Fraile’s interview of Mercedes Roffé on *Definición de savia*, Radio Círculo, Círculo de Bellas Artes de Madrid, February 24, 2010.
language building in the face of destruction. When catastrophes level cities, bodies and our loved ones, language too is leveled in our screams. Nonetheless, as Susan Gubar has suggested, poetic techniques can remind us of our subjective capacity to construct language again. They offer the possibility, or at least the hope, that a broken language, and from there the broken body, might also be remembered whole even if it is never to be recuperated.4

This first poem draws on Tibetan Dream Yoga, which teaches that one way to sleep is to remain in constant vigil, the idea being to achieve illumination. Here too are the first, second and tenth letters of the Hebrew alphabet: Aleph, Beth and Yod. Yod, (י) the smallest letter, recalls the geometry of creation in its script; it is also the unit, or atom, from which all other letters, and thus things that might be named, begin and end. Yod is the extraordinary contradiction of the origin, the presence of God in all things in that it signals its own vast potential at the same time that, like an infant, it is the tiniest and most humble of all the letters. In this dream state, illuminated, Roffé then moves us to the “suspension of sense” or “sentido” as a univocal concept, toward “fullness” as necessarily plural. “[F]ullness” levels the privileged sense, which is sight, with the aural, olfactory, tactile and gustatory, again, grounding the experience of meaning in the body.

Suspension of sense to see fullness
Suspension of sense to hear fullness
Suspension of sense to smell and touch
taste of fullness
Suspension of sense to feel fullness
Suspension of all senses for the fullness of sense

The multiple and singular
The untranslatable

The echo
perfect and full

It is only through this embodiment, dream-illumination, suspension, fullness, and inhabitation at the edge of language that we might prepare to face the existence of evil indexed in poem II.

In Asian religious ceremonies, floating lanterns convey the living’s longing for the dead as they illuminate wandering the horizon, the edge of water and sky, night and day, sleep and wakefulness. But each individual lantern reflects a more profound call for unity among the living. We are like those lamps wandering and searching for one another at those very edges. Similarly, Walter Benjamin believed that all languages yearn for one another in the common things they wish to express. That is, languages crave a prelapsarian, pre-Babelic unity. Roffé also expresses this need for confluence by presenting sacred, philosophical, poetic and meditative traditions that have complementary, if not corresponding, impulses. “[B]ecause to feel is more than seeing but even more so is to merge” suggests a common longing for unity in a world that has been so deeply wounded and torn apart.

I don’t know what the language—those terms, contracts, sanctions, ideologies, governments or diplomatic strategies—of such a unity would look like, nor, it seems does anyone. But what Roffé asks is how we might provide a human response to that predicament without perpetuating the terms of the disaster in the first place. In poem IV, Roffé speaks to that ironic and catastrophic perpetuity:

3000 bombs
3000 bombs
3000 bombs in one weekend
how many faces
how many hands
how many legs
how many veils-gauze stuck to skin burning
how many stones over stones torn away
how many lives torn from life

Roffé’s response to this sense of continual loss is Las linternas flotantes, a prayer of human poetic craft destined for human—not divine—ears. This prayer seeks a subjective agency over what she considers history’s master narratives, narratives that have made us their object:

I think that humanity is a victim—today as in the Middle Ages and in Biblical times—of certain discourses that consider themselves “masters” (that of science, politics, religion, economy, that of the mass media…). Half of those discourses, so rigorously articulated, are intentionally false; they’re deceitful. The other half is and has always been simply wrong.

I think of poetry and art in general as an alternative to that monolithic idiocy, that is so sure of itself, inviolable—until history or reality reveals them as pathetic, temporary constructs. Unfortunately, those constructs cost many lives. Arrogance and idiocy always cost lives… I think of poetry as a tentative discourse that is always on the side of life and peace. Always.  

Roffé thus identifies evil as that which incites such master narratives at the same time that it conserves them. Poetic form, as a

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5 From “El poema como eco de un universo musical,” interview with Nelly R. Guanich, Periódico de poesía No. 44, de noviembre de 2011. “Como te digo, creo que la humanidad es víctima—hoy como en la Edad Media y en los tiempos bíblicos—de ciertos discursos que se pretenden “maestros” (el de la ciencia, el de la política, el de la religión, el de la economía, el de los medios…). La mitad de esos discursos, tan rigurosamente articulados, son intencionalmente falsos, mentirosos. La otra mitad son y han sido siempre sencillamente erróneos. Conciibo la poesía y el arte en general como una alternativa a esas necedades monolíticas, seguras de sí mismas, infranqueables—hasta que la historia o la realidad las pone en evidencia como tristes, temporarios constructos. Lamentablemente, esos constructos cuestan muchas vidas. La prepotencia y la necedad siempre cuestan vidas… Pienso en la poesía como un discurso tentativo, pero del lado de la vida y de la paz. Siempre.” My translation.
“tentative discourse” is, like Yod, as humble as it is ambitious, as multiple as it is persistent in its desire to build again, to recover, and remember that even before evil and language there was goodness.

Anna Deeny
Washington, D.C.,
2015
Floating Lanterns
I.

Dormir con los ojos abiertos, bien abiertos
Dormir alerta
Dormir de pie, con la frente apoyada en el vano del día
Residir la noche toda en la pura presencia de la letra
Aleph Beth Yod
el rasgo el trazo-cifra

Residir la noche entera en la vigilia
Residir la noche toda insomne
Residir la vida toda en duermevela

*porque sentir es más que ver y más aun es fundirse*

Residir la noche en el velo de la noche
Residir la noche toda en el alba
Residir la noche toda en el alba pura y plena
Residir la noche en el umbral de la noche
Residir la noche entera
del otro lado del sueño

Residir la noche en el mar profundo
en la vigilia del mar
Residir la noche toda en lo profundo
y ver la noche toda reflejada en la noche
y el fluir de los peces cortando a pique el cielo
el canto de los peces cortando el cielo
y las lustrosas yemas de las algas cimbreando
punteando
la noche oscura del agua
I.

To sleep with eyes wide open
To sleep alert
Standing, forehead propped against the day’s hinge
To inhabit the night wholly in the pure presence of the letter
Aleph Beth Yod
the mark the trace-cipher

To inhabit the night entirely in vigil
To inhabit the night wholly insomniac
To inhabit life wholly wakeful

because to feel is more than seeing but even more so is to merge

To inhabit the night in the veil of night
To inhabit the night wholly at dawn
To inhabit the night wholly in the pure and full dawn
To inhabit the night at the threshold of night
To inhabit the night entirely
on the other side of sleep

To inhabit the night in the sea deep
within the sea’s vigil
To inhabit the night wholly in the depths
and look at night wholly reflected in night
and the fish stream cleaving the sky
their flanks splitting the sky
and the lustrous fingertips of swaying algae
tapping
water’s dark night
los mascarones fantasmas de los buques del sueño
los mascarones en el aire azul flotando
maridándose con las almas

Residir la noche en el borde de la noche
abajo, donde mora el reflejo verdadero
más allá, donde mora la luna,
no su reflejo
sino su cara de plata verdadera

Tejer la noche con el alba, el alba con el día
el día con el estridor del despertar
las trompetas del día
los metales vibrantes de la orquesta del día

Residir en la llama, en su bóveda azul fría,
en el vibrante azul inofensivo
refugio, templo, iglú en el origen del fuego
estar en el centro y verlo
estar en el centro y hablarle
estar en el centro y no temer
y que no sea temible
sólo belleza pura
oro
y poder verla de frente y verla
y que no sea temible aunque lo sea
SUSPENSIÓN
de todo,
de todos los sentidos
de lo corpóreo y frágil, vulnerable, mortal, hirsuto
de todos los sentidos
the ghostly figureheads of slumber’s ships dream
the figureheads in blue air floating
wedding souls

To inhabit the night at the edge of night
below, where true reflection dwells
beyond, where the moon dwells,
not its reflection
but its true silver face

To weave the night with dawn, the dawn with day
the day with the stridor of awakening
the day’s trumpets
the vibrant metals of its orchestra

To inhabit the flame, its cold blue dome,
the vibrant innocuous blue
refuge, temple, igloo at the origin of fire
to be at the center and look at it
to be at the center and speak to it
at the center and not fear
and that it not be frightening
only pure beauty
gold
and to be able to look at it and see it
and that it not be frightening even though it is
SUSPENSION
of all,
of all senses
of the corporeal and fragile, vulnerable, mortal, hirsute
of all senses
Suspensión del sentido para ver lo pleno
Suspensión del sentido para oír lo pleno
Suspensión del sentido para oler y tocar
gustación de lo pleno
Suspensión del sentido para sentir lo pleno
Suspensión de todos los sentidos para el sentido pleno
Lo múltiple y uno
Lo intraducible
El eco
perfecto y pleno

Porque hay verdad y hay ecos
Hay verdad y hay sombras
Hay verdad y hay la flagrante arquitectura
    que la cubre y la oculta y la rodea
    y la mina y la cerca y distorsiona
Hay verdad y hay espejos
Hay verdad y hay espejos que la cercan
Hay verdad y hay espejos
    que traen del sueño la rama que lo prueba
Y hay verdad y hay espejos
    que desdicen
hasta los rosados dedos de la aurora
Suspension of sense to see fullness
Suspension of sense to hear fullness
Suspension of sense to smell and touch
taste of fullness
Suspension of sense to feel fullness
Suspension of all senses for the fullness of sense
The multiple and singular
The untranslatable
The echo
perfect and full

Because truth and echoes exist
Truth and shadows
Truth and the flagrant architecture that
covers it and conceals it and surrounds it
and mines and encircles and distorts it
Truth and mirrors
Truth and mirrors that encircle it
Truth and mirrors
that from dreams convey the branch of evidence
And there is truth and there are mirrors
that unsay
even the rosy fingers of dawn