

The Self, Wherever She Is

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Grand Tour

by Elisa Gonzalez.
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“WE MEET no Stranger but Ourselves”: Emily Dickinson’s haunting pronouncement on the plight of the individual consciousness may be cited less often than the bit about her head flying off—that telltale sign of being in the presence of her chosen art—but it speaks as profoundly to the reasons we read and write poems. They bridge the distance between ourselves and others, possibly even transmuting the pain of this ongoing isolation into something that might be liberating, consoling. Seen one way, poetry’s deep solitude, its way of examining our very strangeness to ourselves, could become a kind of company already.

Elisa Gonzalez’s poignant debut, *Grand Tour*, marks her out as one of a line of poets who have asked, with a thinker’s scruple as much as a lover’s intensity, just what it is to be a poet writing. Someone thinking aloud and alone, turning words up and over? Or some one addressing some other? A life story lies behind this orientation: as Gonzalez has commented, her collection traverses a series of islands, literal and otherwise. “It’s a story of the island my father left; of the island of the family; of Cyprus, the island that enthralled me in part because of my separation from Puerto Rico. And of the island of the self, uneasy and alone wherever she is.”

Though Gonzalez is not afraid of the grand gesture, some of this collection’s most searching lines are borne out to us in moments of intimate reflection, her self-questioning hard to pin down in any one tone. “First Tuesday in May” takes shape around a cruelly intrusive question if ever there was one—missionaries stumbling all unwanted into a deathbed scene—but in the ramifying space of the poem, their question’s glibness gives way to unexpected depths:

My grandmother died the day
the missionaries came for our souls.
To save them, I mean.

They cycled up the drive
as my mother and I carried her to the van,
on the way to the hospital.

[...]

so I looked at the wheels
not the missionaries, who asked,
Do you have a source of happiness in your
life?

What was my answer, what is it now?

Here as elsewhere, Gonzalez’s consciousness is porous enough, sufficiently open to sensation, that she cannot

simply tune out the question. What we gain as a result is this very beautiful dwelling in uncertainty, as the thoughtless insistence of the missionaries’ question opens out on a much more far-reaching form of unknowing, equal parts longing and self-accusation. The answer the poet still searches for (“what is it now?”) can only be changed by the lingering fact of loss. It is this persistence of loss her question affectingly registers.

The collection’s opening poem, “Notes Toward an Elegy,” tells us in its very title that the work of mourning—of making a beloved person present again, to the extent that words can—can only ever be a matter of approximation. If no poem is ever finished, there’s a second sense in which no elegy can ever be an achieved effort. And yet Gonzalez’s lines are gorgeous in their plenitude, the way they luxuriate in the lavishly drawn fragment, sketching out what it was to be in this other woman’s presence, whether friend or lover, sitting with others in the Old City in Cyprus:

Hot mornings. Hot apple tea, honeyed.
The mountains a fist knuckled on the
horizon.
Dust is coming, dust is not yet here.

Whenever her hands dance, I tell her how
beautiful.
She says there’s so much other movement I
do not perceive.
And I accept the presence of dances
invisible to me.

Her companion’s lesson—accepted right away, as a kindred intuition between them—might almost have been preparation for this, the pain of her absence, but Gonzalez remains drawn to the dance of things as they are, to the immanent as much as the invisible. She might be serenely open to the unseen, but this isn’t to say she moves past the pull of the visible with any ease. Thus all the particulars her poem takes the time to notice: this “white wine greening a glass,” say, or that “copper bowl in her hands.”

Amid such bright noticing of what’s visible and what isn’t, one quantity seems to encompass both realms. “I ask her to read to me,” Gonzalez says, “I like the way her voice handles words.” These lines have a way of reminding us just what an intimate, inimitable thing someone else’s voice is—representing, in itself, a way of being in the world. And so the disarming back-and-forth Gonzalez remembers—“Why read when we can talk? When all our friends are here?”—comes to us with a new pathos, marked by a longing for those everyday forms of presence of which friendships or loves are made, the stuff of life itself. Whatever presence a poem gives us, it is something else. This recognition might be what lies behind “a shudder stopped / in the throat” of the poet, a

sudden proclivity for “silence”—a “perversity,” she says, but a necessary one, whether in the way it anticipates or memorializes loss. The remembered voice of her friend haunts and solaces in equal measure; it’s a voice she still hears. Inhabiting her poem, we can feel ourselves in the presence of its own vanished dance, or nearly: “When all the time I hear her voice: / I am glad my soul met your soul.”

GRAND TOUR is dedicated to Gonzalez’s younger brother Stephen, murdered at twenty-two. Her poem “After My Brother’s Death, I Reflect On the *Iliad*” is, true to that title, a work of anguished reflection, but it would be a lesser thing if it were not also born of those “untrammelled feelings” that the poet elsewhere acknowledges at her core. Here, in balance with the work of reflection, we have rage and reverie and, perhaps most indelibly, the ambiguous solace of remembered togetherness. Asked by a friend in the aftermath of her brother’s death if she knows a piece from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gonzalez is brought back instead to this memory of her brother:

when you were eleven or twelve, when you
tripped
silent alarm after silent alarm, skating out
of each room

as guards jostled in, and I—though
charged with keeping you
from trouble—joined the game, and the
whole time we never laughed,
not till we were released into the grand air
we couldn’t touch and could.

A whole world of shared possibility, of “trouble” that is only innocent play, now looked back on longingly, comes through in “the grand air” the poet and her brother launch out into, that phrase forming a resonant rhyme with the collection’s title. Against the brutality of the present, against all that threatens to crowd out such memories (“nights, I replay news footage: your blood on asphalt”), the poet goes to the *Iliad* for what solace it can give. The epic’s violence now seems all too familiar; Gonzalez finds “on rereading” that “even there, a man kills his neighbor.” But the ancient poem also offers a sense of humane likeness in its images of grieved, self-sacrificing love, as in the figure of Priam, that father who appeals to the enemy Achilles to let him recover the body of his son:

In my ear Priam repeats, I have kissed the
hand of the man who killed my son.
Would I do that? I ask as I pass the store
labeled SIGNS SIGNS.

I’ve studied the mug shot of the man who
killed you; I can imagine his hands.
Of course I would. Each finger, even.
To hold your body again. And to resurrect
you? Who knows what I am capable of.

Or what a poem might be capable of, for that matter. “You won’t come to me in my dreams,” Gonzalez writes, “so I must communicate by other avenues.” The whole poem offers itself, with its use of direct address, as an effort to form just such an avenue of communion between the living and the dead. This dimension comes through most affectingly toward the poem’s

close: “Mischief companion. Brother. Listen to me // plead for your life though even in the dream I know you’re already dead.” In the space of two lines, in this one uninterrupted thought, we see the tragic passage from an abiding belief in another’s presence—the older sister imploring “listen to me”—to the poet’s concession that perhaps the breaks in historical time a poem or line might open up can only be a desolating illusion, a matter of self-address that doesn’t get us anywhere.

GONZALEZ ULTIMATELY rejects this dispiriting conclusion. That is, her poems outstare it. Their vital way of reflecting, of extending themselves by way of deeply felt and revelatory connections, carries on. As candidly as her poems take up personal tragedy along with the national mess (a recurrent point of allusion in these poems is the misrule of capitalism in our time), Gonzalez makes a redemptive case for those forms of ongoing presence poetry makes possible. “The only possible epiphany is that the ending of a thought is never such,” she writes memorably in another poem whose title bears the words “I reflect...” That intellectual principle could double as a *cri de coeur*. Here the subjects of reflection are manifold, all of them primary, all emerging with a kind of spontaneity a mere accounting might belie. Entering into her mind are the death of Ophelia, the solitude of the pandemic, the specter of capitalism, the deprivations of childhood, and, emerging somehow in balance with these forms of suffering and injustice, what it might mean to “still love the world” in spite of all.

There’s something intoxicating about the way Gonzalez’s mind moves, as she remembers a professor’s question (“Who is really responsible for the death of Ophelia?”) and, after crediting a simile of his (“the answer, he said, ought to feel like we have arrived together / At a skyscraper’s peak”), aims to arrive at a response that might satisfy her own scrupulous mind. On view is a certain restless intelligence, as Romantic in its music as it is skeptical in substance, at once enraptured and disabused.

Together. I liked the word in the professor’s
mouth.
But if I am alone, and if I am lonely, and if
I am not alone in loneliness, and if the
everyone
together suffers, and if this everyone suffers
and dies by the unguided motion of
matter, and if
also by the motion of selfbent self-guided
men, and if also by the motion of
money, and if of course
you were always going to die, Ophelia, and
if even so your death remains
unforgivable,
then what questions should I ask?

The energy of these questions negates the despair any one of them might suggest if taken in isolation or treated as some final word. And so when Gonzalez says that she “can imagine” the “sleeplessness and rage” that reside in these lines “going on past my ending,” we are ready to imagine this with her, whether we take this ending to mean that of the poem or even that of the body itself, the specter

of mortality entering in.

The last line of the poem leaves us with one more question—one punctuated by a note belonging entirely to this poet. Of that “sleeplessness and rage” she asks, “What more suitable ghost could I leave behind? Since I do love the world.” Is this a kind of hard-won affirmation, a note of rapture tempered by what’s come before? Or is it instead merely irony? Perhaps we’ve come beyond that simple binary. So, too, the appealingly grand air of these lines comes hand in hand with a decided intimacy of address, as if a poem *were* finally a kind of thinking conducted in company, a matter of implicating and inviting the reader in, line by line. It’s as if Gonzalez were aware at this juncture of the presence of her listener, solitary but believing—someone to commune with, to answer, and to question.□