

*Poems by Anna Aguilar Amat (Catalonia) translated by Anna Crowe (Scotland)*

*Conèixer*

Que els altres són com tu, de tots els pensaments cruels,  
és el que mulla més. Els pren allò que és seu:  
la forma dels cabells, el color dels teixits,  
el traçat de les lletres, difuminat com molsa.  
Si penso que ets com jo, deixo de veure  
que el riure és un desordre d'aire arremolinat al cove  
de la gola. Que les tardes es poden quedar quietes,  
en un instant etern, com colibrís que beuen.  
Quan penses que ets com jo, salto de branca  
en branca fugint del teu foc moll que em llepa.  
Qui ha bufat massa fort? Qui ha dit  
que sap com som, que el temps cal mastegar-lo  
cinquanta-cinc vegades?

**Knowledge of others**

Of all cruel thoughts, the one of others being like you  
is the most drenching. It takes from them what is theirs:  
the way their hair grows, the colour of their garments,  
the shape of their handwriting, all blurred, like moss.  
If I think that you are like me, I no longer see  
that laughter is a tangle of air whirled in the rattle-bag  
of your throat. Or that afternoons can be still,  
for an endless instant, like humming-birds drinking.  
When you think you are like me, I leap from branch  
to branch to escape from your wet, licking fire.  
Who is it has blown too hard? Who has said  
they know what we're like, or that time has to be chewed,  
every mouthful, fifty-five times?

## *Petrolier i Teatre*

Aquesta nit un altre petrolier ha rebentat a les estrelles.  
El cel es fa pesant pel cortinatge fosc que es mou  
com una serp, al nord i al sud en moments diferents.  
¿Qui ha accionat la palanca equivocadament,  
quan no hi havia entreacte?  
Diuen que el teloner sóc jo, i ara la llum desapareix  
com si l'home del sac l'hagués robada.  
Se'n va la neu de l'escenari, la teva veu, les lloses  
de la casa de sucre que entre els dos hem bastit  
i el bressol que teixies amb paraules.  
Tot i que em sembla nou, conec bé aquest teló fet de mortalla,  
de cuirs de llops, draps de la pols que pengen, despulles  
de llebrers que no eren bons per la cacera.  
Parracs dels noms dels que no sé estimar.  
Les teves mans, les meves, buides com guants de goma.  
Els nostres llavis d'enfilalls de moixama  
repetint quatre notes de grans obres simfòniques que  
ofeguen plors de nens.  
Llavors venen les basques i els glaçons amb forma de pingüí  
que em pugen a la gola. Contra les meves dents,  
abans de caure a terra,  
fan el soroll de claus a punt d'obrir la porta.  
¿Ets tu el gos adormit que sembla mort, que dóna i pren calor  
d'entre les meves cames?  
Potser jo sóc el gos, i tu,  
el captaire.

## **Oil-tanker and theatre**

Tonight another oil-tanker has burst among the stars.  
The sky grows heavy with dark curtains moving  
snake-like, north and south in different waves.  
Who has pulled the lever down in error  
when there was no interval?  
Someone says I'm the stage-manager and now light vanishes  
as though spirited away by the bogeyman.  
Snow on the stage melts, along with your voice, and the slabs  
of the candy house we built together,  
along with the cradle you wove with words.  
Although it looks new, I recognise this theatre-curtain sewn with shrouds,  
with wolf-skins, with dust hanging in rags, and the remains  
of hounds who were no use for hunting.  
Shreds of names of those I don't know how to love.  
Your hands, and mine, empty as rubber-gloves.

Our lips, strips of dried fish  
repeating a few notes from great symphonies which  
drown the cries of children.

Then comes the retching and the ice-cubes shaped like penguins  
welling up in my throat. Before they fall to the floor,  
they rattle against my teeth with a noise like keys  
about to open a door.

Is it you, this sleeping dog that looks dead, that gives  
and takes away warmth from between my legs?

Maybe I am the dog, and you  
the beggar.

## *Formalitats*

Quan em dones les gràcies si em somriuen les mans,  
per una flor que em creix als ulls, una cita d'en  
Chesterton o l'inconfesat desig de cordar-te un botó,  
resto sempre callada.

¿Com podria dir "de res" si aquestes momes ho són tot?  
Piguetes infantils que tornen a sortir amb l'edat,  
rosada que el cel ha destil·lat perquè n'hi pugui beure  
aquella abella.

Com la noia que surt a la finestra a estendre un  
vestit roig i la mira l'obrer mentre posa ciment  
a la casa veïna o la bastida que el sosté, a vint  
metres d'alçada.

¿Com podrien dir "de res"?

Però ara jo també vull dir "gràcies" perquè has fet  
de l'espera un bon estenedor pels meus vestits de festa  
i puc escriure mel de la set i la calma, i sento,  
quan feinejo, el vertigen punyent i desitjo la vida.

I no em diguis "de res".

Potser s'escau "perdó" a aquest espai de les formalitats

- que és el que jo dic sempre, i tu restes callat.

Perdó perquè el dolor de no tenir-te no s'acaba,  
pel núvol d'esperança que t'és fàcil llaurar,  
pel pessimisme que desfàs com un terròs de sucre  
amb la teva humitat universal que fa les coses grosses  
toves, i les petites altes, lliscants per tobogans de fulles verdes.  
(No té importància l'esbrinar perquè aquest poema  
s'havia intitulat "cosir").

## **Formalities**

When you thank me for my smiling hands,  
for a flower growing in my eyes, for a quotation from  
Chesterton, or for the secret longing to do up one of your buttons,  
I always remain silent.

How could I say "it's nothing" if these gifts are "all"?

Little freckles that come back with age,  
dew that the sky distills for that bee  
to drink.

Like the girl who comes to the window to hang out  
a red dress and looks at the workman laying concrete  
in the house next door or at the scaffolding supporting him  
twenty metres above the street.

How would they say “It’s nothing”?  
But now I also want to say “thank you” because you have turned  
the waiting into a fine washing-line for my best dresses  
and I can write honey from thirst and calm, and doing chores  
I feel that stab of vertigo and I want to live.  
And don’t say “it’s nothing”.  
Perhaps “sorry” will fit this space for formalities—  
that’s what I always say, and you stay silent.  
Sorry because the pain of not having you never ends,  
for the cloud of hope you can so easily plough,  
for the pessimism you melt, like a sugar lump,  
with the universal humidity that makes great things  
soft, and small things lofty, sliding down toboggans of green leaves.  
(It’s irrelevant to try to guess why this poem  
was originally called “Sewing”)

## *L'Atlas*

Plana per plana em mostra l'anatomia del món  
- *tomia*, que vol dir 'tall'. Rius, trens, ciutats  
- venes, costelles, òrgans, jeuen enqüadernats i reduïts  
sota els caps dels meus dits - que pensin ells, avui.  
Doncs m'has fet invident miro de veure acarontant  
paisatges aplanats per la ficció. És minso  
el que té a veure aquesta tosca representació  
amb l'olor del pa o el so de les campanes o la llum  
del capvespre sobre una paret. Una finestra  
a terra com un toll i els nens d'altri que juguen.  
Aquest país al mapa és una dona que serva un got  
de sake acalat a la falda: el kimono estampat,  
els ulls ebris d'enyor. Singapur, Siracusa, Siena,  
l'ocell, la mà, la teva veu diu "mira". I tanmateix  
la reducció perfecte, l'escala no permet de calcular  
quin és nostre destí. La xarxa de distàncies  
deliniades que entrelliguen Tu i Jo -dos topònims unguits  
per un corrent fluvial no navegable de saliva,  
no pot predir què fóra, lluny de tot, de la nostra beutat.  
Si al port seríem rebuts pel sol o la tempesta  
o el tel boirós i fred de l'alè dels que ens jutgen,  
ni si allò que veuríem seria neu trepitjada  
per les nostres mentides - que allà on anem també  
hi va la ciutat. I aquests cercles concèntrics gemegants,  
són de dolor o plaer? El cim d'una sapiència  
que era un deure assolir? O el lloc que va acollir l'Adam  
cansat del paradís, on va saber que no havia marxat.  
Al Nord o a l'Est o aquí sempre hi ha el mar; futur,  
present, passat; les nostres mans són rastres de petxines.

## The Atlas

Page by page it shows me the anatomy of the world  
-tomy, meaning *cut*. Rivers, trains, cities  
—veins, ribs, organs, lie bound together and reduced  
under my fingertips —let them do the thinking, today.  
Since you have made me inward-looking I stare to see  
those landscapes sheltering there that fiction has flattened out.  
It's very tenuous, whatever that crude representation has to do  
with the smell of bread or the sound of bells or the evening light  
touching a wall. A window on the world like a rain-puddle,  
and someone else's children playing.  
This country on the map is a woman holding a glass  
of *sake* close to her skirt: in a printed kimono, her eyes  
drunk with homesickness. Singapore, Syracuse, Sienna,  
your eyes, your hand, your voice all say "Look." And though  
the scale is perfect, it's too small to let us work out  
where our destiny lies. The net of distances,  
neatly marked, that link You and Me—two place-names  
annointed by spittle's unnavigable river-current cannot  
predict what may become, far-off, of this beauty that is ours.  
Whether, entering port, we shall be welcomed by sun or by storm  
or the cold mist of the breath of those who judge us,  
or whether what we see might be snow trampled  
by our own lies—for where we go, there the city  
also goes. And these groaning, concentric circles,  
are their groans cries of pleasure or pain? The peak  
of knowledge it was our duty to possess?  
Or the place that welcomed Adam weary of Eden,  
and where he found he had never moved away?  
North, or east, or here, there is always the sea; that will be,  
that was, is now; our hands are the remains of shells.

## *La meva filla*

L'olor a llegiu de les mans de la mare. L'àvia, al mig de la terrassa assolada, es recolzava a la barana i s'assecava amb la brisa els cabells blancs i llargs. Jugàvem a espiar-la i a dir que era una bruixa, perquè la vèiem sola. Per això tinc por que algú vingui algun dia a fer-me el "paseillo". Què així va ser com van fer morir l'avi. Que potser els molestava que feia feina sol, envoltat de silenci i el tabac de la pipa i la sal dels moluscs que manllevava al mar. Potser l'odi dels altres és una cosa que també s'hereta, com el color dels ulls, l'onicofàgia, l'afany blau d'endreçar els fils del cosidor o el plaer d'uns petons que no han estat permesos i no es pot beneir.

*Així, sens prémer massa, fes rodolar la trufa pel reblum de fideus de xocolata, fins que sembli una esfera. Després, no es pot menjar. Fa mal de panxa la mantega tan tova. S'han de prendre més fredes. És una espera obligatòria, fins que arribin els àpats que honoraran tal postre.*

Un dia va venir l'àvia amb uns sabatots vells i em va dir que eren meus. "És demència senil", em deia el pare. Unes sabates negres, com les que jo tinc ara.

*Seu. Aixeca't. No t'alcis les faldilles al carrer. T'esperes fins a casa. Aguanta't. Hi havies d'haver pensat abans.*

Hi havia un test amb alfàbrega i un altre test amb menta. "Això no són maduixes". Les que són de debó són petites i dures com una unglà.

Si la mare comprava pastes de te vermelles, el meu germà i jo fèiem cinc voltes a la taula.

La taula era de roure i hi posàvem betum, igual com a les botes els dies d'anar a escola.

*"Vine mare", ja vinc. Ajegudeta al llit fas un paisatge de dos turons suaus com muntanyes d'Escòcia. T'agafo fort, així, sota l'aixella, prima com una tija tendre de roser, d'abracoquer, i et dic a cau d'orella que t'estimo. I també que em perdonis. He tingut mal humor aquesta tarda. Tu ets tan bonica! Molt més bona i bonica del que mai he pogut imaginar...*

## **My daughter**

That smell, you read it on your mother's hands. Grandmother was



leaning on the railings, halfway along the sunlit terrace,  
letting the wind dry her long white hair. We were playing at  
spying on her, telling her she was a witch, because she was always  
on her own. That's why I'm scared that one day someone will come  
and make me take that *paseillo*\*. Because that's how they made  
Grandfather die. Maybe because it annoyed them that he always worked  
on his own, wrapped in silence and pipesmoke and the briny smell  
of shellfish he lifted from the sea. Maybe other people's hate  
is another thing you can inherit, like the colour of your eyes,  
or nail-biting, or the burning need to tidy the reels of thread in the sewing-box  
or the pleasure of some kisses, taken without permission, that can never  
be blessed.

*Then, without pressing too heavily, you roll the truffle in  
a heap of chocolate vermicelli, until it looks like a ball.  
Afterwards you can't eat it. Butter as soft as that  
gives you the stomach-ache. You have to eat them  
when they're colder. There's a compulsory  
waiting time, until you have the kind of meal  
that's worthy of a dessert like that.*

One day my grandmother came up to me with a pair of  
old shoes, and told me they were mine. "It's  
senile dementia," my father said. Black shoes, just like  
the ones I'm wearing now.

*Sit down. Sit up straight. Don't ever pull your knickers down  
in the street. Wait until you get home. Hold it  
in. You should have thought of it sooner.*

There was one pot with basil in it, and another pot with mint.  
"Those huge things aren't strawberries." Real  
strawberries were wild, and tiny and hard as nails.  
If our mother bought red iced cakes for tea,  
my brother and I ran five times round the table.  
The table was made of oak, and we polished it  
with blacking, same as we did our boots  
on schooldays.

*"Mother, come here", I'm coming.* Lying there in bed, you're  
a landscape with two small hills, gentle as Scottish mountains.  
I hold you tightly, so, under each arm, thin as a tender rose-  
stalk, or apricot twig, and I whisper into your ear that I love you.  
And tell you I'm sorry. I was in a bad mood this afternoon.  
You're so pretty! Much nicer and prettier than I ever thought you could possibly be.

\**paseillo*: (Castillian)the *little walk*. This is a euphemism dating from the time of the  
Spanish Civil War, when teams of militia would arrest a suspect, usually at night, and

after interrogating them, take them to the outskirts of the town and shoot them, leaving the body beside the road.

