

Juan Antonio Villacañas

Selected Poems

Bilingual edition
translated and introduced by
Michael Smith and
Beatriz Villacañas

Edited by Luis Ingelmo

Shearsman Books
Exeter

First published in in the United Kingdom in 2009 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
58 Velwell Road
Exeter EX4 4LD

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-063-7

First Edition

Original texts and drawings

copyright © Herederos de Juan Antonio Villacañas.

Translations copyright © Michael Smith and Beatriz Villacañas, 2009.

Introduction © Michael Smith and Beatriz Villacañas, 2009.

The right of Michael Smith and Beatriz Villacañas to be identified as the authors of these translations, and the rights of Michael Smith and Beatriz Villacañas as the authors of the Introduction have been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.
All rights reserved.

Acknowledgement

The translators wish to express their thanks to Luis Ingelmo for his careful selection and editing of the poems in this book.

CONTENTS

Introduction	9
from <i>THE ANIMATED STATUE</i> (1957)	
Like a dead bird . . .	13
‘Songs from one evening’	15
from <i>DE-TRIUMPHANT MARCH</i> (1960)	
The Story of a Fountain	19
The Story of a Shadow	19
The Voice of a Tale	21
The Earth and I	21
Man, Sometimes	25
De-triumphant March	25
Elegy of Astonishment	27
Ecstasy 1959	29
Elegy of ‘Never’	31
The Master Hand	35
from <i>MUSIC ON THE HILLS</i> (1961)	
First Movement — Adagio	37
Second Movement — Andante	37
Third Movement — Allegro	37
from <i>VAGUE THOUGHTS</i> (1962)	
Shadow of Nine O’clock	39
Song to Ask for Freedom	39
Wine’s Guest	41
from <i>GAMES ARCADE</i> (1964)	
Today I Gamble with the Shadow	43
I Count My Steps Just So	45
Round Time	45
This Mine of Man	47
Eve	49

from <i>THE TOADS</i> (1968)	
The Chaplain	53
from <i>JAIL OF FREEDOM</i> (1969–71)	
Juan Prays in New York	57
from <i>THE HUMAN WOUNDS OF STONES</i> (1971)	
Pebble	59
from <i>REVOLT OF A NEWBORN</i> (1973)	
With Closed Eyes	63
Nobody	65
Breath	67
I am Resurrecting	67
A Look Around	67
Prisoners' Escape	69
The Flies	71
I Float on This Snow	71
The Stains	73
After Being Whipped	75
Smell of Flesh	77
I Search for Myself in All Positions	79
Cremation	81
Pollution	83
Revolt of a Newborn	85
What's That Thing, Love?	85
Fountain	87
Brief Account of a Day Hunting	89
Futile Promise	91
Killing with Two Hands	93
Disloyalty	93
The Open Door	93
Prize Giving	97
Let the Fire Be Welcome	97
Rolling from Other Fairs	103
Sun	103
New Song After the Tears	103

from <i>DANTE IN TOLEDO</i> (1980)	
Canto XIV	107
from <i>HOMAGE TO THE LIRE IN A LONG AFTER-DINNER WITH LUCIAN</i> (1993)	
Almost a Biography	111
from <i>A DEATH FOR EACH MAN</i> (1996)	
Night's Motifs	117
Emotional Letter from Juan Amor de Velasco	119
Hybrid Poem to Hear Myself	121
from <i>ON THE FRINGES OF THE PASSABLE</i> (1996)	
Don't Go Out to the Street, Poetry	129
I Suspect with the Greatest Humility	131
Podium	135
from <i>UPRISING OF MELANCHOLY</i> (1997)	
Virtual Contradiction	139
A Very Lucky Common Grave	141
from <i>SAINT DEMON IN HEAVEN</i> (1998)	
Verse Accuses Me So	143
Neruda	145
from <i>SUBLIMATION OF DISOBEDIENCE</i> (1998)	
Body's Allocution	147
from <i>BABBLING (EARTH'S SORE)</i> (1999)	
Meeting and Farewell	149
When Love Hides	151
That Dog is Ours	153
from <i>THEME OF MY BIOGRAPHY</i> (2000)	
Literaturaliae	157
In the Bleeding Crevice	157
My Star Has Become Angry	159
Invention of Peace	161

INTRODUCTION

JUAN ANTONIO VILLACAÑAS (1922–2001)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Juan Antonio Villacañas was born on January 10, 1922, in Toledo, then a small city, but with a rich artistic and literary history, inseparable from painters such as El Greco or poets such as Garcilaso de la Vega. He was the first born of five siblings into a family of modest means.

The Civil War interrupted Villacañas' secondary studies at the age of fourteen. He spent the war years with his mother and three of his siblings with relatives in Madrid and, more often, in several villages of the province of Toledo, in the so-called republican zone, while his father had to remain in Toledo, in the so-called nationalist zone. During these years Villacañas worked in several manual jobs, mainly in bread- and wine- making.

At eighteen Villacañas went to Melilla, the Spanish base in North Africa, to do his military service. While in Melilla, he started his serious reading of Spanish and French authors, his literary interests later broadening out to embrace other literatures.

Back in Toledo, he obtained administrative work in the cultural and archival section of the Town Hall, in which he remained until illness forced his retirement in 1982. He was married to Antonia Palomo and they had two daughters. His work experience in the Town Hall enabled him to write *Los Sapos* (The Toads), a book of poems and an indictment against the abuses of power, not only of municipal power, but of power in any political institution. Apart from its literary merits, the courage of the undertaking should not be overlooked, as the book was published in 1968, during the Franco régime, and written by a government institution.

Villacañas always lived in Toledo and, despite the advice of some of his friends, refused to move to Madrid where he could more easily have advanced his literary career. However, he travelled through France and Central Europe, went sometimes to Madrid to give readings or visit friends, but he remained independent of literary circles and devoted himself to poetry. He also wrote literary criticism.

Despite his staunch independence and his residence in a provincial city, Villacañas won international recognition, especially during the sixties and seventies. His work appeared in the most reputable literary magazines and important anthologies of Spanish poetry.

THE POETRY

Broadly speaking, the poetry of Villacañas may be described as an inquiry into the subjects of life, death, love and transcendence. In Villacañas's own words:

Las flores y los pájaros son los mismos. Y el amor, la vida y la muerte aguardan invencibles a todas las generaciones.¹

With *Marcha Destriunfal* (De-triumphal March), 1960, Villacañas, in a pioneering and uncompromising way for the times, probes into man's capability and means of self-destruction. And, as always, death and life are present:

La muerte es una vida de preguntas
que se van enterrando;
y uno termina siempre con la duda
enredada en los labios.²

It is difficult to place the work of Villacañas in a Spanish context. He is not a politically partisan poet; nor does his poetry have the expansive, even effusive romanticism that is so often perceived as the hallmark of Spanish poetry. He wrote about social, scientific and classical matters as well as writing deeply personal and spiritual poetry. Technically, he employed free verse but also the traditional sonnet form and, quite extensively, especially in later life, the *lira* form, a classical metre associated with Saint John of the Cross and Garcilaso de la Vega. These *liras* are not pastiches of the old *liras* but are re-invented by Villacañas to serve his own special needs, much in the way that many modern poets writing in English have re-invented the sonnet form.

One tries to think of a poet in English whose work may have something in common with that of Villacañas. The Irish poet, Austin Clarke, comes to mind, especially in his later poems. In these, Clarke wrote about the mundanities of Irish life: the repressive influence on society of a Manichean-Irish Catholicism, the corruption of politicians,

¹ 'Flowers and birds are the same. And love, life and death await, invincible, all generations.' Juan Antonio Villacañas, 1952, in *Versómanos*, 1989.

² 'Death is a life of questions / that we continue to bury; / and one always ends with doubt / entangled in the lips.' From the 'Epilogue.'

the destructive social effect of growing materialism on traditional Irish life. Clarke's obsessive anti-clericalism can become tedious but, like the social poetry of Villacañas, it is always driven by genuine concern and compassion for the victims of institutions of any sort. The following are two stanzas of Clarke's 'The Envy of Poor Lovers':

Pity poor lovers who may not do what they please
With their kisses under a hedge, before a raindrop
Unhouses it; and astir from wretched centuries,
Bramble and briar remind them of the saints.

.....

Think, children, of institutions mured above
Your ignorance, where every look is veiled,
State-paid to snatch away the folly of poor lovers
For whom, it seems, the sacraments have failed.³

During Franco's regime Villacañas never compromised. With the arrival of democracy he did not run, as did many, to obtain a place for himself within the comfort of new groups of power and influence. Consequently his work was deplorably neglected. But he has champions of his work, such as Emilio Porta, who wrote:

Time will do justice to one of the best poets of the twentieth century, Juan Antonio Villacañas . . . An independent work, which does not follow tendencies or fashions, which makes language a vehicle of incomparable beauty and knowledge. A universal poet . . . a poet that always ought to be cited among the great of poetry in the Spanish language.⁴

Whether Villacañas wrote in *liras*, sonnets, free verse or whatever form, his poetry constantly springs from a profound search for transcendence and a concern for humanity that can make him to be at once social and spiritual. The vigour of his verses gives them quite often a muscular quality which appears equally in his most earthy poems of

³ Austin Clarke: *Collected Poems*, Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1974, p. 205.

⁴ *Mirador: Revista de la Asociación de Escritores y Artistas Españoles*, No. 8, March, 2004.

indictment or solidarity and in those in which he looks for God, suffers His silence or talks to Him.

As New York University professor and poet Hilario Barrero affirms:

But Juan Antonio Villacañas was more than a social poet, or a poet of the universe, or a religious poet, or a poet of human themes, or a poet of love. Villacañas, apart from being a generous person, cordial, a poet in the deepest sense of the word, he is, above all, a poet of all times, a poet of yesterday, a poet of tomorrow. A poet yet to be discovered. A poet who, in life, despite prizes and triumphs, did not get the recognition that other inferior poets had, and that today are forgotten. Especially during his last years, critics” turned their back to him. But he remained faithful to that which was his passion, poetry, a poetry that has the flow of a river, the serenity of an autumn day, the light that must be in the look of God.⁵

MICHAEL SMITH
DUBLIN, 2009

BEATRIZ VILLACAÑAS
MADRID, 2009

⁵ *Almacén: Revista Poética*. <<http://www.librodenotas.com/almacen/Archivos/006163.html>>.

de *LA ESTATUA ANIMADA* (1957)

Como un pájaro muerto
después de haber latido,
clavada entre mis manos
estás, llena de ausencia.

Si el latido volviera
a calentar la estatua,
todo el hueco del hombre
ardería en milagros.

(Un paso más y espero
tu alteración divina).

....

No dejes de llamarme
al latido del tiempo.
Te escucharé contando
la eternidad de un día.

....

Delante de mí estás tú
y yo soñando contigo.

....

Yo te estoy esperando muy lejos de tu paso
con las manos cruzadas, mirando al horizonte.
En cada orilla tengo carne para el dolor.
Y, en mi fondo, la muerte.
(Es todo lo que guardo
para reconocerte).

from *THE ANIMATED STATUE* (1957)

Like a dead bird
after having throbbed,
nailed in my hands
you are, full of absence.

If the throb came again
to kindle the statue,
man's full hollow
would fire up in miracles.

(One more step and I await
your divine alteration).

....

Do not cease to call me
along the throb of time.
I shall listen to you counting
one day's eternity.

....

You, in front of me
and I dreaming of you.

....

I am waiting for you very far from your step
with my hands crossed, looking at the skyline.
On each bank I have flesh for pain.
And, in my depth, death.
(That is all I keep
to recognize you).

«Canciones de una Tarde»

La mariposa viene
todas las tardes
a posarse en las flores
que no se abren.
También es pena
que la vida termine
por donde empieza.

....

Comenzando el trabajo
de levantarme,
por el árbol y el viento
llega mi sangre.
De dónde viene...
Eso es cosa muy honda
para mi frente.

....

Tengo unas manos nuevas
para olvidarme
de la fuerza del hombre
que me dio carne.
Es una pena
que no sepa la vida
por dónde llega.

....

De todos los colores
que he descubierto,
el de tu piedra, estatua,
luce más dentro.
Cómo se llama...

'Songs from One Evening'

The butterfly comes
every evening
to alight on the flowers
that do not open.
Isn't it sad
that life finishes
where it starts.

....

Once the task of getting up
has begun,
through the tree and the wind
my blood arrives.
From where does it come...
That is too deep a thing
for my forehead.

....

I have new hands
to forget
the strength of the man
who gave me flesh.
It is a pity
that life does not know
from where it comes.

....

Of all the colours
I have discovered,
that of your stone, statue,
shines most deeply.
What is it called...

Tiene un nombre que huye
de las palabras.

....

Y mientras tú dormías
sobre la arena,
más y más me alejaba
con mis estrellas.
Como un amigo
me vino Dios hablando
por el camino.

It has a name that flees
from words.

....

And while you were sleeping
on the sand,
further and further I moved away
with my stars.
Like a friend
God came talking to me
along the way.

de *MARCHA DESTRIUNFAL* (1960)

El cuento de una fuente

Esto era una fuente, donde un día
yo escuchaba su agua como un cuento.
Una emoción se me llevaba el viento
y otra nueva emoción lo devolvía.

Allí queda la fuente todavía
como un estar de canto ceniciento.
Allí queda en el agua aquel momento
en que hundí la emoción que no era mía.

Esto era un cuento, un viento y una fuente
con emoción de agua para el río
que se bebe su vida de repente.

Y allí queda la fuente, en el vacío
que viene ahogando sucesivamente
aquel amor donde perdí yo el mío.

El cuento de una sombra

No negra, sino gris. Acostumbrada
a rastrear al hombre tierra afuera.
No os extrañéis que a veces se metiera
tierra adentro del hombre disfrazada.

Se venía conmigo, más que nada,
para espantar mi cuerpo a su manera.
No negra, sino gris. Mi sombra era
una porción de vida terminada.

from *DE-TRIUMPHANT MARCH* (1960)

The Story of a Fountain

Once upon a time there was a fountain,
where one day I heard its water like a story.
The wind brought me a feeling
and another feeling brought it back.

The fountain is still there
like a presence of ashen song.
It stays there in the water that moment
in which I drown the feeling not mine.

Once upon a time there was a story,
a wind and a fountain with a feeling of water
for the river that suddenly drinks up its life.

And the fountain is there, in the emptiness
that comes drowning successively
that love where I lost mine.

The Story of a Shadow

Not black, but grey. Accustomed
to tracking men outdoors.
Don't be surprised that sometimes disguised
it meddles land within man.

It came with me, above all,
to frighten my body in its way.
Not black, but grey. My shadow
was a piece of an ended life.

Hoy que me quedo solo en esta muerte,
la soledad me llora por la cara
al ver cómo mi sombra se divierte.

(Tenía mi sombra empeño en que sonara,
de que el silencio diera un grito fuerte
y que gritase yo cuando él callara).

La voz de un cuento

Toma mi voz. Y ponle tu sonido
para que sienta yo donde confina.
Dale un poco de culpa femenina,
que la estoy esperando en el oído.

Llevo miles de años detenido
en el tronco de un árbol. Se adivina
mi compás interior en la resina
y en la corteza que se le ha caído.

Coróname de niños, Hada, y pasa
por esta voz hasta el final del árbol,
donde seremos mudos a dos voces.

Que este silencio que nos acompasa,
cuando a la vida tenga que contarle,
ponga en el corazón sus altavoces.

La tierra y yo

¡Qué tranquilidad más honda,
circundado de música,
a orillas de la muerte!

Now I am alone in this death,
solitude laments me in the face
on seeing how my shadow is amused.

(My shadow insisted on sounding,
on the silence giving a strong shout
and on I shouting when it became quiet.)

The Voice of a Tale

Take my voice. Lend it your sound
so I feel its limits.
Give it something of feminine guilt,
for I'm awaiting it in my own ear.

For thousands of years I've been held
in the trunk of a tree. My inner rhythm
can be divined in its sap
and in its fallen bark.

Crown me with children, Fairy, and enter
through this voice to the core of the tree,
where we shall be silent with two voices.

Let this silence that now encompasses us,
when I must tell life its story,
place in my heart its own loudspeakers.

The Earth and I

What a deep calm:
encircled by music
on the shores of death!

–Bajad, ángeles de ahora,
a este lugar
donde se lavan mis años con la nieve y el sol.

La tierra es breve,
tan breve como la solemnidad de un hombre.
El campo es la renovación de los colores,
del perfume,
del alimento,
del hambre . . .

–Tomad conmigo esta palabra
elaborada en ello,
y oídme en el minuto exacto
de este principio y fin interminables.

Los astros son miradas perezosas
tan oscilantes como corazones,
con la misma oscuridad y el mismo brillo,
dispersos de verdad entre nosotros.

(¡Cosas del porvenir!)

La lluvia sobre las plantas
hermosea su dolor.
Lo mismo ocurre con el pan de cada día:
Nos prolonga el sacrificio.
Y corremos a él a vida o muerte.

(Cuando tú, tierra, dejes de palpitar entre mi carne
yo, carne, te entregaré toda mi tierra).

'Descend, you angels of to-day,
to this place
where my years are washed with snow and sun.'

The earth is brief,
as brief as a man's solemnity.
The fields are the renewal of colours,
of perfume,
of food,
of hunger . . .

'Take this word with me
a word made up of all of this
and hear me in the exact moment
of this endless beginning and end.'

The spheres are idle looks
oscillating as hearts,
the same darkness, the same shine,
scattered in truth among us.

(Things of the future!)

The rain on the plants
makes their pain beautiful.
The same thing happens with the daily bread:
it prolongs the sacrifice for us.
And we run toward it risking life or death.

(When you, Earth, stop pulsating in my flesh
I, flesh, will give you all my earth).