

Arcana
and other poems

Also by Verónica Volkow

Poetry:

La Sibila de Cumas

Litoral de tinta

El inicio

Los caminos

Arcanos

Oro del viento

Litoral de tinta y otros poemas

Prose

Graciela Iturbide: Los disfraces

Sudáfrica: diario de un viaje

La mordedura de la risa

La noche viuda

Arcana
and other poems

VERÓNICA VOLKOW

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VERÓNICA VOLKOW'S POETRY: A FEW POINTERS

Let it be said at the beginning that the poetry of Verónica Volkow is difficult, especially for the Anglophone reader unfamiliar with the essentially spiritual nature of Mexican poetry. Her poetry is an exploration of the possibilities of the transcendental nature of human experience, which runs counter to the quotidian proclivity of contemporary poetry in English. Nor is it Francophile in any adherence to cliquish modism. Octavio Paz's influence is undoubtedly evident both in the content and techniques of Volkow's work, but Volkow's poetry nonetheless possesses its own distinctive voice. It has a deeply personal meaning that comes out of her own life, of suffering, joy and discovery. As she herself has written: "The uttermost reality is totally spiritual, and we need to learn more and more how to see it with our inner eye." Dante and St John of the Cross come to mind regarding these particulars, when they claimed that poetry is an uttering of love—and the soul.

Although there is no apparent trace of Borges' influence in her work, she frequently refers to mirrors and dreams, perhaps denoting the void that Volkow relates to Octavio Paz. As she said in an interview some time ago, quoting Paz, "we are all dancing above the void." But there is nothing nihilistic about her work. Quite the contrary: love and life, she believes, command our commitment to the mysterious world we live in. She has translated the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop and has acknowledged the influence of the American poet. It is likely that what she sensed in Bishop's poetry was the ambiguous nature of reality, the sense of other possibilities that her descriptions offer, not allegorically but suggestively, inviting the reader to look at the expanding circles of meaning that the cast stone spreads on the water.

Volkow acknowledges the difference between Mexican poetry and poetry in English. That difference has to do with the Spanish Baroque (Juana Inés of the Cross would be a sensible referent, herself feeding from Calderón de la Barca's poetics), its displacement of the personal as the centre of things.

And despite this, she still is drawn to the sensitive personality, which she finds, especially in American women poets. She loves the eroticism of their work, perhaps as a contrary to her own Mexican tradition. She may like the poetry of, say, Sylvia Plath, but she knows that it is not the poetry she herself would or could write. Has colonialism something to do with this? The great Peruvian poet, César Vallejo, confronted the colonial problem by subverting the Spanish language, especially in *Trilce*, almost as an act of rebellion against the old colonial masters. Volkow has her own techniques, to which she gives content and expression without resorting to a biography of the quotidian or the anecdotal. Indeed, a person's joy or suffering is of secondary importance when seeking the unity of everything, of being. Like Vallejo's, Volkow's is a poetry of searching, and the old masters—be they local or foreign—cannot turn one's own poetry into a sole repetition of their findings: models are nothing but a springboard of sorts in order to better learn about one's soul and regional idiom and spirit.

To enter the world of Verónica Volkow is to enter a magical world, exotic but never precious. It is mysterious in its ellipses and strange combinations of metaphors, doubtless due to the influence that surrealism has had on her work. But it is a poetry that is nonetheless anchored in reality, however transmuted that reality may be by the preoccupations that Volkow brings to her observations. Octavio Paz claimed of Juana Inés of the Cross something that could be easily applied to Volkow's work: "The Mexican poet sets out to discover a reality that, by definition, is unseen. Her subject matter is the experience of a world that lies beyond the senses."

Translating Verónica Volkow's poetry has been a challenging but deeply rewarding experience, mostly due to the hermetic quality of many of the poems. As a prolific and fine translator herself, Volkow appreciates the difficulty of the task while at the same time stating that she loves translating and she has even gone so far as to state that, "The best reading you can get is through translating . . . it's the closest you can get to another writer." The present translators have indeed been fortunate in

having the author's generous assistance when help was sought; and we have also been lucky in being able to draw constantly on Tony Frazer of Shearsman Books for his enthusiasm and his expert advice. Needless to say, of course, it is the translators themselves who must take responsibility for what finally emerges.

Luis Ingelmo
Ávila, 2009

Michael Smith
Dublin, 2009

Arcanos
y
otros poemas

Arcana
and
Other Poems

ARCANO 1

EL MAGO

¿Quién escuchó la voz del viento,
la palabra que dice,
su grito interminable en la montaña,
y descifró el lenguaje de los ruidos,
el galopar de letras del follaje,
y las «eles» del agua?
¿Quién atrapó con un nombre el fondo de la noche,
la rasgadura del rayo?
Poderes precisos de lo etéreo,
y un saber que rescata en manos de aire.
Lo eterno es hueco, es forma, es alma
—esa imposible sed de la memoria.
Sin cuerpo y sin las cosas,
sólo viento y sueños, las palabras,
viento tejido por los sueños,
almas al aire que el silencio olvida,
estatuas de la ausencia insomnes,
despertar de la nada hacia la nada.
Hay sombras en los sueños
 que no son de las cosas,
sino cuerpos quizá de las palabras,
ánimas de los nombres,
resurrección de la llamada.
Para poder morir son las palabras:
salvación profunda de lo ido,
tiempo enamorado que habla.

ARCANUM 1

THE MAGICIAN

Who listened to the voice of the wind,
the word that speaks,
its unceasing shout in the mountain,
and deciphered the language of noises,
the galloping of the letters of foliage,
the liquid 'l's' of water?
Who captured with a name the night's depth
and the tearing flash of lightning?
Precise power of the ethereal,
and a knowledge that rescues in aerial hands.
The eternal is a gap, a form, a soul
—that impossible thirst of memory.
Bodiless and without substance,
nothing but wind and dreams, words,
wind woven by dreams,
souls in the air which silence forgets,
insomniac statues of absence,
waking from nothingness to nothingness.
In dreams there are shadows
 which are not of things,
but maybe the body of words,
the soul of names,
the resurrection of calls.
Words are to help us die:
profound salvation of what's gone,
time speaking in love.

ARCANO 2

LA SACERDOTISA

No se mira la noche,
se sueña
y los sueños
como la luna son reflejos,
flotan aquí y están en otra parte.

Ancla la transparencia en el espacio,
mas vuela el velo
fuera del tiempo como ensueño;
el velo deshaciéndose de vela
y disuelve a la noche en un suspenso.
Luz ya casi más niebla
y que es un sueño
náufrago de misterio.

Vela que zarpa hacia lo tenue
y luz que se adelgaza
quizás hasta perderse,
disipación sutil
que el aire excava:
desaparecido interior
que es un afuera.
Hundido desconcierto en lo intangible.

La eternidad está durmiendo
bajo el tiempo,
y los astros en su lejanía inmersos
permanecen idénticos.

ARCANUM 2

THE HIGH PRIESTESS

Night is not observed,
it is dreamt
and dreams
like the moon are reflections—
they float here and are elsewhere.

Transparence anchors in space
but the veil flies
outside time as if day-dreaming;
unravelling, the veil reveals
and dissolves night into suspense.
Light is almost mist now
and a dream
 a castaway into mystery.

A sail weighing anchor toward the tenuous
and light that grows faint
maybe to the point of disappearing,
subtle dissipation
digging the air:
a vanished interior
which is an exterior.
Sunk startling into the intangible.

Eternity is sleeping
under time,
and stars, immersed in their distance,
remain identical.

ARCANO 3

LA EMPERATRIZ

Piel profunda región de la añoranza.
La delicadeza tan sólo
despierta lo recóndito.
Hermética la suavidad invoca,
búsqueda interna como un vientre.
Lo hondo sin fin: lo femenino
lo entraña y humo,
sutileza que hiende.
Aromas por desfiladeros
y precipicios como oídos
en donde no sabemos quién escucha
y discierne un sentido en lo secreto.
Con el azar fabrica una escritura.

Noche abismal, la piel,
donde brillan los cuerpos con su luz infinita,
grandes dioses de carne,
y el deseo que nos postra.
Sed de vértigo y espejo,
cielo clavado, sed de lo más hondo,
del firmamento, sus destellos
y espacio sin fronteras.
¡Ser, ay, que nos estalla: luminosos y ciegos!

Brilla incrustado un mundo
—el ojo— a orillas de la carne.
Pero la piel sueña, ni ve, ni escucha,
en la caricia vuela,
ya es mar a la llamada,
toque sobre un abismo que concurre al espejo.
La noche abierta encuentra las estrellas
y la savia da frutos buscando la semilla.

ARCANUM 3
THE EMPRESS

Skin profound region of longing.
Only delicacy
wakens the recondite.
Softness, hermetic, invokes,
an inner search like a womb.
Endless depth: the feminine,
 the innards and smoke,
subtlety that cleaves.
Scents through defiles
and precipices like ears
where we don't know who listens
and discerns a sense in what's secret.
It creates a writing from chance.

Abysmal night, skin,
where bodies shine with their infinite light,
great gods of flesh,
and a desire that prostrates us.
Thirst for frenzy and a mirror,
sky stuck inside, thirst for what is deepest,
for the firmament, its flashes
and space without boundaries.
A being that explodes us, luminous and blind!

An incrustated world—the eye—
shines on the banks of the flesh.
But the skin dreams, doesn't see, or hear,
flies in caress;
summoned, it's now a sea,
a peal over the abyss that meets in the mirror.
Open night encounters the stars,
and the sap yields fruits seeking its own seed.

ARCANO 4

EL EMPERADOR

Entallaron la piedra
hasta que recordara:
ejércitos como ecos que estampan las colinas,
lanzas y saetas ciertas con la muerte erizadas
y volutas veloces que deslizan el río;
las plantas y las bestias, tributos derramados,
y hundidos en un número, idénticos esclavos.
Extrajeron el mundo de la roca,
le pusieron cuatro esquinas al tiempo
y guardaron en muros
lo interior del espacio.
Crear un hueco, un patio,
la nada de lo abstracto,
la moneda en la mano,
la rueda que al vaciarse avanza,
el dibujo del que un ser deserta;
o tomar entre manos exactas lo perdido,
cantera y cántaro la estatua,
agua imposible y piedra.
Formas con el poder de su vacío,
su ceñido abismo, su llamado,
como vasos traídos del reino de los muertos.
La espada creó la forma del imperio;
el cincel, los muertos, las estatuas que habitamos.
Somos el despertar de su escritura,
su mundo interno, su añoranza humeante.
La materia es un hueco en que soñamos.

ARCANUM 4

THE EMPEROR

They carved the stone
until it remembered:
armies like echoes printing the hills,
lances and arrows pointed with death
and swift spirals that slide down the river.
Plants and beasts, lavished tributes,
and identical slaves sunk in a number.
They extracted the world from rock,
they boxed time in
and within walls they guarded
the interior of space.
To create a hole, a courtyard,
the nothingness of the abstract,
the coin in one's hand,
the wheel that emptying moves on,
the drawing from which a being deserts;
or to take what is lost between exact hands,
the statue a quarry and a jug,
impossible water and stone.
Forms with the power of their own emptiness,
their tight abyss, their call,
like glasses brought from the kingdom of the dead.
The sword shaped the empire;
the chisel, the dead, the statues we inhabit.
We are the waking of their writing,
their inner world, their smouldering longing.
Matter is a hole in which we dream.

ARCANO 5

EL HIEROFANTE

La cúpula amarrada por un centro,
las bóvedas ceñidas son estrellas,
y una mano invisible une un dibujo.
Geometría entrañada hay en las cosas
y constelación subterránea.

Aquí piedras respiran la música del templo,
metales y maderas cantan
un mundo que se inhala,
voz que es esencias
y fuego de sentido
despierto en cada piedra.

La memoria en vuelo va por dentro,
el viento sopla interno y es recuerdo,
silbo de entraña que lo escucha,
un tiempo casi puro
y desterrado en sueños
y un decir cosas transparentes
que son alma y son nada.

Inmensidades guarda
en su interior el templo,
en los muros las conchas
con sus manos agarran los sonidos;
orbes de noche y sol: follajes.
Agujero del cielo
en el claustro: la fuente.

ARCANUM 5

THE HIEROPHANT

The cupola tied to a centre,
the embraced vaults are stars,
and an invisible hand links a drawing.
There is an inner geometry in things
and a subterranean constellation.

Here stones breathe the music of the temple,
brass and wood sing
a world inhaled,
a voice of essences
and a fire of sense
awake in every stone.

Memory in flight is deep down,
the wind blows internally and is recollection,
a whistle from the innards that listens to it,
a time almost pure
and exiled in dreams
and a saying of transparent things
that are soul and are nothing.

The temple guards
immensities inside,
in its walls shells
with their hands grab sounds—
spheres of night and sun: foliage.
A heavenly gap
in its cloister: the fountain.