

SAMPLER

Nightmare Running...

ALSO BY MARÍA BARANDA AT SHEARSMAN BOOKS

Ficticia (translated by Joshua Edwards)

SAMPLER

María Baranda

Nightmare
Running on a
Meadow of
Absolute Light

SAMPLER

Two Poems

translated by Paul Hoover

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Introduction

María Baranda is one of the leading Mexican poets of the generation born in the 1960s. Her work has received Mexico's distinguished Efraín Huerta and Aguascalientes national poetry prizes, as well as Spain's Francisco de Quevedo Prize for Ibero-American Poetry. Encouraged in her youth by the great Colombian poet and writer, Álvaro Mutis, she is increasingly known for her sweeping and incisive long poems and book-length projects, such as the sequence, 'Letters to Robinson.' Of the volume, *Ficticia*, in which the Robinson poems appear, Forrest Gander writes that María Baranda "keeps honing in on one of the most expressive lyricisms in contemporary Mexican poetry." He refers also to "her complex prosody—the pitch and tempo rising in plangent cadences that break into sharp, percussive counterpoint." The sea setting of her volume *Ficticia* (2006/2010) is in perfect keeping with Baranda's verbal momentum. Despite being epic in weight and size, her poems do not patiently narrate. Their way of telling is instead a stark announcement of being similar to an invocation; for instance, in *Narrar* (2001):

A cry that in itself
is the size of the sea
and lives at the center of rapture
and with each step it yields
to the delirium of a sponge
that inflates in sweat and gives glory
to the time of silent prayers
A cry is the caiman's vigil
the unleashed whip of an ant

For Baranda, narration is not of social relations but of the essential. Her cry is resoundingly of sea, sponge, ant, and prayer, as related in rapture. The poem's broad perspective may be influenced by the intensity and range of Vicente Huidobro's *Altazor*, an untranslatable word that joins "high" (*alta*) with "hawk" (*azor*):

I love my eyes and your eyes and eyes
Eyes with their own flash-point
Eyes that dance to the sound of an inner music

And open like a door onto a crime
And abandon their orbits and go off like bloodstained
 comets into chance
Eyes so sharp they leave wounds that are slow to heal
And can't be closed like an envelope
 (Trans. Eliot Weinberger)

Unlike Huidobro, Baranda does not introduce the “I” of herself as author. She richly embodies the other. The speaker, we know from the Góngora epigraph, is “it.” Therefore, the cry is of a universal voice, of the sky, a dolphin, and the caiman’s vigil. Baranda’s lyrical agency is of course significant.

Despite the richness of her verbal weave, the mention of Góngora should not suggest that Baranda is *barroco* in her poetics. In the fierce literary politics of Mexico City, strongly impacted by the dominance of men, she stands as an independent figure. She is a poet of epic vision, who views the broader tapestry of fate, in which we might recognize “an agonizing smile / in the punctual / sweetness / of the one who is drowning.” That vision ranges from “the newlywed God” (an impostor) to “the sharp bite of hunger / under the yoke of a sugar mill.”

The reference in ‘Narrar’ to a *tokonoma* leads us to the poem ‘Pavilion of Nothingness’ (‘El pabellón de la vacuidad’) by José Lezama Lima, the Cuban writer recognized as establishing the neobarroco mode of Latin American literature. A *tokonoma* is an alcove in traditional Japanese houses that is reserved for the display of wall-scrolls and art objects. In his poem, the *tokonoma* represents the imaginative power of emptiness waiting to be filled. In Baranda’s work as in Lezama-Lima’s, many figures compete for metaphorical control of that alcove. Characterized by layers and multiplicities, their work communicates both the provisional and necessary. The provisional act of Lezama-Lima is to cut a crevice with his fingernail in the paper wall of the *tokonoma*. All is made possible, from kangaroos to *sapodilla* ice cream, by that one marking, analogous to the pen on paper. In Baranda’s poem, a “maelstrom of all the whales in the sea” is invoked. We speak of the “purely poetic,” but the poetic includes the nearly empty shrine of possibility and the messy actuality of life. Baranda works toward the maximal and the simultaneous, where the motive is fate. The drama of her cadences in Spanish is not disguised by the English translation. For a more perfect knowledge of ‘Narrar,’ however, ask a Spanish speaker to recite the first movement: “al mar

un grito / que se rompe y se repita / que se vacie / y al tiempo de la sal.” The rhythm of enunciation is remarkable, especially when Baranda herself is the speaker.

María Baranda’s poetry has been translated into English, French, Lithuanian, Turkish, and Italian. Her poetry books in English are *Ficticia*, translated by Joshua Edwards (Shearsman Books, 2010) and *If We Have Lost our Oldest Tales*, translated by Lorna Shaughnessy (Arlen House, 2006).

In his preface to *If We Have Lost Our Oldest Tales*, Anthony Stanton notes her special relationship with the long poem, a poetic form which he calls “one of the great achievements of modern Western verse.”¹ Stanton specifically remarks on her connection to the long poems of Saint-John Perse, Vicente Huidobro, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and José Gorostiza, author of *Muerte sin fin* (Endless Death). Her proclivity for the long poem began with her first book, *El jardín de los encantamientos* (The Garden of Enchantments), published in 1989.

I selected Baranda’s long poem, ‘Nightmare Running on a Meadow of Absolute Light’ for its force of language, dreamlike power, and connection to the poetry of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, whose words, taken from ‘First Dream,’ are embedded and scattered through sections of Baranda’s poem.

Even the title of Baranda’s poem, ‘Nightmare Running on a Meadow of Absolute Light,’ reflects the power of her subjects and themes. She strikes for the magical and the essential. The poem concludes with the intense four-page coda, ‘Vibora’:

And I said viper and saw myself unscrewed, cardial and unique,
carnavalesque and spoken, more vivid by means of the simple
tree of language, first among the gestures of all that blood

gone from my eyes toward a point of-what-other, with the root
certainty of how-one-is-made at that time only
when fear is inscribed among the folds of the skin.

The viper is a figure for the poet as a shifting and enfolding mage; it is also the poem, ‘Nightmare Running,’ with its page by page transformations. The quotations from Sor Juana, which appear in bold-face, lend an interruptive quality that is new to Baranda’s work; for example:

¹ Galway, Ireland: 2006, p. 7.

It will have (*to climb*) to look over the night,
 the first, (*trying*) to listen
 their multitude (*the stars*) of wes-wes-wes
 a little bit (*while*) in the half-hearted
 those who await (*their lights*) and chat away
 over there (*beautiful*) outside.
 O those who (*without*) pray and invoke:
 runners (*always*) of thorns,
 time (*always*) dilated
 between the (*dazzling*) needles of a lower site
 enclosed (*the dark*) between spikes and barbs
 below the light (*war*) green:
 trees (*that with black*) liquids
 between (*vapors*) or other punctuated places.
 points where (*become intimate*) it sees itself
 news (*the terrifying*) fall in the eye
 and the eye (*shadow*) opens
 to a single mouth (*fugitive*) silent.

It is also possible to read the boldface as its own postmodern lyric
 (“the terrifying / shadow / fugitive”). The phrase “wes-wes-wes” is an
 approximation of the Baranda’s “oes-oes-oes,” suggestive of the Spanish
 word “oeste” (west).

María Baranda is at her full strength as a poet and deserves to be
 better known by readers of English. As Mexican critic José María
 Espinasa wrote in support of *Ficticia*, “María Baranda is today one of
 our country’s necessary poets.”

Paul Hoover

To Tell

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Its horrendous voice, not its inner sorrow
—Góngora

A cry
just a cry
a single cry
to the open air
a cry of porpoise or dolphin
of incandescent fish by the water
a cry of the sea that breaks and repeats
that empties
and in the time of salt
says everywhere what it says that swells
that glows
a cry
a single cry
just a cry
of the blue inconceivable sky
that repeats
that advances
that grazes among the algae
the fetid rumor of the brackish
a providential cry in the voice of air
an unsustainable rhythm
in the throat
A cry that knots itself
in symphonic circles of joy
A terrible cry
that announces the first death
that stands on precarious feet
and dismantles shadows and grumbling
A cry that must choose
for between the walls the liquid deepens

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The wall as a cardinal point
an agonizing smile
in the punctual
sweetness
of the one who is drowning

A cry disbanded
in a garden with thickets
a dream of blue light for the birds
A cry that in itself
is the size of the sea
and lives at the center of rapture
and with each step it yields
to the delirium of a sponge
that inflates in sweat and gives glory
to the time of silent prayers
A cry is the caiman's vigil
the unleashed whip of an ant
the fan of yes the same immaculate
air of an inhospitable grudge
that bends
The cry that smells of salt
a wild beast dry
horny
in the dusky collapse
of your herd
The cry distilled from minutes
marks the world that is world forever
in an open moment where never
passes nothing and everything dissolves
hurling itself to the bottom

Nothingness is reason falling
finally it's emptiness
its bend in the road most refreshing
when the tree
is erected in delirium

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in order to sing from its purgatory
its novice illusions
almost vertigo

A cry is sleepless in its dream
faded almost hoarse it stuns itself
like a crippled animal
the cry breathes sleep inside
its eyes and evokes a sacrifice
a dark joy in a spiral of weeping

The cry moans weeps wallows
glacial polygamous decrepit
sinking into flakes and scales
into mud
the cry sleeps alone
in the hollow of useless blindfolds
its intoxicated pallor
in its cadence and fatigue
it buzzes between the glasses and the cans
the remains are still ripe
and the sweet song
of the flies to vacancy

The cry is deeply in love
and sweet together with the soft souls
Rose to call it rose
is a corrupt luxury
a brief heart
that detracts
The cry is the insistence
on misery is the sharp bite of hunger
under the yoke of a sugar mill
a fire burning
among dogs and rats
is a shadow that crosses
the fetid waters of wonder

and it's the clamor of three nights
of the sickness of women, hens, and female deer
when the gods
lose their harmony and quickly
offer their shame to the twilight

The cry is air
air that only blossoms
in the half-light of funerals
The cry is the voice of the obsequies
a wafer in the pupils
which prays "Praise be to God
without God's silent cry
infinitely bitter and dry
and the newlywed God the round impostor
who belches who vomits who repeats
fragrant at the pit and doesn't say
not to purify the skin
devour candles and beautify
blind beneath the definitive sun
lethargic in the accounting
of a glass beaded God summit
red-hot incredulous God
who doesn't ask for pardon
in the omen of dead birds."

A cry
just a cry
a single cry
it whips in lines
and looks dissolved
between the vertices of song
(sings among the captive petals
And don't forget me in the diaspora
sing sing deadly like an archangel
about about to shout his song)
The cry is erased

between the breasts that slander
sinks convenes seizes
becomes and is consumed
penetrates licks fits
in cartilage of fire
where it resides

The cry is just a number
a notch at the base of the wall
as meticulous
as a *tokonoma*
utmost swiftness of spirit
freezes the Cuban's print
bevels the aperture in the absurd
that dominates corners of the language
that exposes itself as a maelstrom
of all the whales in the sea
is an emaciated shell
adhering to the pale shadow
that crosses our sleep
The cry
is a mixture of sperm
and civil life
in living circumstances
a sign of those black fruits
where peace putrefies
streaked by oblivion
where their error is overheard
in a Parthenon of voices
and the air unfolded fornicates
voluptuously and never knows
of the children awakening
in endless tunnels
lost

The cry
roams the meadows climbs sandbanks

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is hidden in the smallest grains of the sap
and splits into two branches
at the curb
of the public gardens
Its light is a wandering stage
where the bodies drink
unchangeable as
the dried blood of vultures
The cry becomes stained, expands
to a canvas painted in bleach
and to moist fish markets in the cracks
that drip their thirst in cathedrals
It calls between shingles and gutters
for the white popcorn of mercy
It doesn't exist
in the vaults that invoke
either groans or excrement
they pour out their prayer to beauty

The cry looks and turns nutritious
among the filaments
subtleties of stalagmites
Its opacity contains and glorifies
the scars of crazy widows
the plagues of corrupted young women
At the center it's gripped at the edge
A luminous crust between the slabs
At night the bodies whip it
they lick it like a cat at the touch
in its delirium In its crevices
the world opens in a color in passage
it flaps its wings in sheets of salt in its integrity
and among the porticos
it feels its furtive gifts
of the filthiest birds in the land
The cry of a flowing spring that overcomes time
soothing of the wrong man

As an insect
lands on the leavening
and gives voice to the rhizome of God
between the lips “die
with bags under your eyes by the name
where quicklime levies a tax
on your dead children”
The cry is only a cry
of silky smoothness where a theologian
lives morbidly in dirty rags in small rooms
Slowly it’s known in the cloudy discharge
at random in broken windows
The cry is the pigment of an incantation
between the orchards and the fruit
of fervent prayer
Drop by drop it sings limitless
in a pit of sky-blue ineptitude
where it drinks the blood by sips
and swigs and names the food
of the executioner
Its bitterness is slow
with the dryness of a sponge
lifeless and scratchy
its devotion like a fever
(To Dimas it tasted like salt
in his bleeding
In Barabbas it was only a fruit
a swordfish in the balance
on the cross exhausted)

Humble and persistent the cry
it is always the acid that saturates us
in agony a single weeping that spills
in the slow endless afternoons of suicide

A cry
exceeds climbs sweats