

Did you hear . . .

Also by Omar Pérez, translated by Kristin Dykstra

Algo de lo sagrado / Something of the Sacred
(Factory School, New York, 2007)

Omar Pérez

**Did you hear about the
fighting cat?**

translated from Spanish by
Kristin Dykstra

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The Spanish text of this book was first published in 1998
by Letras Cubanas, Havana.

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INTRODUCTION

Born in 1964 in Havana, Cuba, Omar Pérez is a member of the first generation to live fully under the auspices of the island's post-1959 government: children raised to envision the present and future in socially experimental terms. His second poetry collection, *Oíste hablar del gato de pelea?*, or *Heard about the Fighting Cat?*, offered a mature, yet unusual, response to that ongoing challenge. The book was originally published by Letras Cubanas in 1998.

The book takes up the experiment of connecting Buddhist practices to an American landscape. In a 2008 interview Pérez states, "If Buddhism is to have a role in Cuban life it must be in harmony with the basic ethical and natural values of this land; it must give, so to say, its blood and marrow to the soil."¹ Pérez seems to have thrown even "revolutionary" readers for a loop by pursuing that harmony, synthesizing island poetics with Zen Buddhism. What, asked his fellow writers, does Zen have to do with Cuba and its cultural traditions?

The question of Zen's potential relation to Cuban culture is at once raised for debate and answered (albeit indirectly) within these poems. One of the threads running through the pages is music, ranging from minimalist intonations to the high energies of the urban *guaguancó*, and beyond Havana's city lines to symbolic sources such as the Cuban national anthem. As the last example hints, another thread in the book takes up the experience of "patria" (homeland). The Buddhist quest for enlightenment intersects with evocations of Havana in the late 1990s, yielding an *other* zone from which the nation and its call are never quite absent. Like the Zen dojo in the center of a lively city, the poetry becomes a place to sound the many layers of Havana's vivid surrounds.

Pérez' literary career ranges from poetry to essays and translations. His first book of poetry was the highly regarded

¹ Interview with Kent Johnson, *Jacket* 35 (2008), <http://jacketmagazine.com/35/perez-ivb-johnson.shtml>

Algo de lo sagrado (Unión, 1996), reprinted in a bilingual edition from Factory School with translations by Kristin Dykstra (NY, 2007; available from Small Press Distribution). He was awarded Cuba's Nicolás Guillén Prize for Poetry for *Crítica de la razón puta* in late 2009, and early 2010 saw the release of his multilingual book of poems, *Lingua Franca* (Havana: Unión).

Pérez won the Cuban National Critics' Prize for the category of the essay in 2000 with his collection *La perseverancia de un hombre oscuro*. A later essay, 'The Zen Dojo in Havana,' is well worth reading with his Buddhist poetry in mind; an English-language translation with critical commentary by Kristin Dykstra appears in *Origin~Longhouse*. Meanwhile Pérez has published translations of work by writers ranging from William Shakespeare to Dylan Thomas and Yusef Komunyakaa, among many others. Recently he began to compose regguetón poems (sound files forthcoming at PennSound archive) and original poetry in English. His work has been published in numerous Spanish-language journals and anthologies. It has been published in English translation in *Fascicle*, *Origin~Longhouse*, *Mandorla: New Writing from the Americas*, *Jacket*, *boundary 2*, *Washington Square*, and elsewhere. His author page at Poetry International Web (digital) includes a short video based in his English-language poem 'Rigmarole.'

Kristin Dykstra

Algunos lo llaman el Juego, otros la Flor o el Espejo. Todos coinciden en que se trata de un instrumento de mutación, como un abanico que se torna espada, luego rama, seca o en floración, luego llamarada y silencio. Un abanico de viaje.

La criatura llega a la Isla con el propósito de la mutación, sin embargo las aguas del océano amniótico le hacen olvidar. La criatura llega a la Isla sin propósito. Más tarde aprende: *praxis, poiesis, Kyrie eleison, benedictus qui venit in nomine domini. I can't give you anything but love baby, Il faut absolument sincère*, cubanidad es amor, las mujeres mandan.

La palabra está en el juego, mas no es el juego, la moral y el ejercicio cíclico de la consciencia están en el juego, mas no son el juego. Patria es una mujer preñada de maíz, libertad es una de las contraseñas pueriles que los jugadores intercambian. La criatura practica el olvido y su cuerpo se enciende con una memoria que traspasa la Isla y el agua que la separa de otras islas. ¡Ay relámpago horizontal sobre la superficie de las aguas! ¡Ay criatura erguida en el cuerpo del relámpago!

“Es una técnica de sinceridad que comprende todas las técnicas”, dijo el Hombre sobre la montaña insular.

“Quiero aprenderla”, saltó la Criatura.

“Es fácil. Fija lo improvisable. Por ejemplo, un beso. Improvisa lo fijo. Por ejemplo, una montaña insular. Dale muerte al criterio”.

“Y mis pensamientos?”, clamó la Criatura.

“No te sirven de nada. Considéralos insectos sobre la corteza de un árbol en crecimiento. Eso es lo sublime del pensar, si te interesa saberlo”.

“Tengo preguntas que responder”, reflexionó la Criatura.

“No respondas nada. No reacciones ante las evidencias. Ahora otra Criatura te espera. Enséñale lo que has olvidado”.

Some call it the Game, others the Flower or the Mirror. All agree that it deals with an instrument for mutation, a fan that becomes sword, then branch—dry or covered in flowers—then a sudden flame, then silence. A fan for a journey.

The creature arrives on the Island with the purpose of mutation, yet the waters of the amniotic ocean cause it to forget. The creature arrives on the Island without a purpose. Later it learns: *praxis, poesis, Kyrie eleison, benedictus qui venit in nomine domini. I can't give you anything but love baby, Il faut être absolument sincère*, Cubanness is love, women are in charge.

The word is there in the game, but it is not the game. Morality and the cyclical working of consciousness are there in the game, but they are not the game. Nation is a woman bearing corn, liberty one of the childish watchwords that the players exchange. The creature practices forgetting and its body catches flame with a memory, one that lances the Island and the water separating it from other islands. O, lightning spreading across the surface of the waters! O creature upright in the body of the lightning!

“It is a technique for sincerity that comprehends all techniques,” said the Man of the island mountain.

“I want to learn it,” the Creature blurted.

“It’s easy. Anchor the improvisational. For example, a kiss. Improvise the anchored. For example, a mountain on an island. Deal a death blow to discernment.”

“And my thoughts?” the Creature protested.

“They’re worthless. Consider them insects on the bark of a growing tree. That is the sublimity of thought, if you’re interested in knowing it.”

“I have questions to answer,” the Creature reflected.

“Don’t answer anything. Don’t react to proofs. Another Creature awaits you now. Show it what you have forgotten.”

I.

INVOCACIÓN DE LA ALBAHACA

I

THE INVOCATION OF BASIL

Como su nombre Índicaos contempla orgullosa
más oscura que el jazmín más perfumada que el aire
si tuviera que correr por los mil mundos
te llevaría en cruz bajo la lengua
déjame aquí mejor, ni planta, ni piedra, ni animal
silencio tiembla cavidad de la campana
hacer algo por la patria deletrée consanguíneo
de flores como lunares en la mejilla del paria
si tuviera que correr por los mil mundos
cromosoma, mambo, Vía Láctea
con licencia pensamiento Oh beata soledad
guaguancó del tiempo España sin pecado concebida
¡león vegetal de la escritura!
mata el deseo de correr por los mil mundos
ni flor, ni bestia, ni apero de labranza duermo
ya no más divididos en sílabas morir por la patria es
en su constelación los embriones
en su casita verde los espíritus
y que todo sea para nada
y que todo sea para nada.

As her name Indicates she looks to you proudly
more obscure than jasmine more perfumed than the air
if I had to race through the thousand worlds
I'd carry you on a cross under my tongue
best leave me here, not plant, nor rock, nor animal
silence quivers cavity of bell's interior
to do something for the patria spell the blood relation
in flowers like moles across the cheek of the pariah
If I had to race through the thousand worlds
chromosome, mambo, the Milky Way
with license thought Oh devout silence
guaguancó from Spain's time without sin conceived
lion of writing!, vegetal
it kills the desire to race through the thousand worlds
not a flower, not a beast, not a farming implement I sleep
no longer divided into syllables to die for the patria is
in their constellation the embryos
in their verdant house the spirits
and may it all be for nothing
and may it all be for nothing.

La delicadeza engendra pánico

Delicacy fathers panic

Lo discontinuo

No siendo Adán sino un lejano sucesor
era indiferente a los nombres de las cosas:
“Al mediodía se echa sobre un rectángulo de tierra
a la sombra de la frase “soy el que soy”
que sus labios proyectan como si realizaran un tatuaje borroso
del encuentro de la luna con un gallo rojizo”.

The discontinuous

Not being Adam but a distant successor
he was indifferent to names given to things:
“At noon he sprawls on a rectangle of earth
in the shadow of the phrase ‘I am the one I am’
that his lips throw as if shading a blurry tattoo
twelve hours later he thinks he’s the result
of the moon’s encounter with a rust-colored rooster.”

El miedo abreva en la ausencia de nobleza

El miedo abreva en la ausencia de nobleza
allí se queda.

Aflora entonces en las medusas, la contradicción de los trapecios
y el desenvolvimiento de las guerras.

Así como la mantis no se hace distinguir por una librea
o una emanación irritante
así como la sangre en las cavidades, aquello que fluye
no suele ni detenerse ni mostrarse.

Fear provides water in the absence of nobility

Fear provides water in the absence of nobility
that's as far as it goes.

It surfaces in jellyfish, the contraction of the trapezoids
and the self-assurance of wars.

Like the mantis it draws no attention with fine livery
or any irritating excretion;
like blood in the cavities, that which flows
neither pauses nor reveals itself.

En el estanque

El pájaro no aprende a volar en el fondo del estanque.
La línea que traza el agua en la arena movediza
no se deja reproducir en adopción
de la misma línea a mano alzada.
El rastreador la sigue con la vista en la ceniza
y se conecta con el humo del tizón apagado.

In the pond

The bird does not learn to fly on the bottom of the pond.
The line that water traces on quicksand
cannot be reproduced by tracing
the same line with the wrist raised.
The tracker follows it, eye trained on ash,
to connect with smoke rising from extinguished embers.