

“Lágrimas negras”

Estoy asustada
por el agua prieta que trago
a buchitos.
Por la apariencia encharcada
del reflejo en la calle,
donde los mosquitos cantan
junto a mis oídos
buscando salvación sin hallarla,
infectándonos de un virus tras otro.
Mientras escucho esa vieja canción
para que me proteja,
pero no me salva,
y me hundo más:
en la poceta con porquería
que flota a intervalos (grises)
entre uniformes que aparecen
detrás de las puertas,
vigilándonos.
Cuando viene el mar subiendo desde Infanta
hasta el muro más bajo
-el de “la ensoñación”, lo llaman-,
y la sal pegajosa los juzga.
Yo solo puedo tocar el mar
-ellos no pueden-,
pero resbalan gustosos entre los cuerpos
que van a desintegrarse
hacia la esquina más salada al doblar
donde arrecifes blandos:
“la salación” - gritaron- desconfían de mí,
también de los demás que los interrumpen,
y asaltan.
Al verlos acuclillados esperando un bote,
una frase
una ofrenda
entre la miseria de tocarse con miedo
-con la infelicidad que trae el miedo-,
al que estamos acostumbrados.

“Black teardrops”

I'm scared
by dark water, which I drink
in tiny sips.
By the flooded surface
of the reflection in the street,
where mosquitos sing
by my ears
seeking salvation without finding it,
infecting us with one virus after another.
While I listen to that old song
“Lágrimas negras” so it will protect me,
but it doesn't save me,
and I sink deeper:
into the tidepool with garbage
that floats at (gray) intervals
among uniforms, which appear
behind doors,
surveilling us.
When the sea rises from Infanta
toward the lowest part of the seawall
—the “dreaming wall” they call it—and
sticky salt passes judgment on them.
I alone can touch the sea
—the men cannot—
but contented, they slip among bodies
which split away toward
the corner with the most salt and the least luck,
turning off toward lenient reefs:
“Catastrophe” – they shouted – they don't trust me
or the uniforms who interrupt them,
who assault them.
Watching them squat down to wait for some boat
some phrase
some offering
amid the misery of brushes with fear
—with the despondence dragged by the fear—
to which we are accustomed.

Translator's Note

This poem melds a classic song dating back to the late 1920s, “Lágrimas negras” (Black tears or teardrops), with a scene from twenty-first-century urban life. Composer Miguel Matamoros is said to have written the original song of suffering, a fusion of *bolero* and *son* forms, about a woman whose husband has just left her.

Poet Reina María Rodríguez flips genders in her poem referencing “Lágrimas negras.” However, she often makes use of ambiguous scenes and language, as well as her own observations and memories, so I asked her about the shadowy figures in this poem, grammatically gendered masculine. She described a highly marginalized group of men who gather by the seawall in Havana. They have been victims of violence, including from authorities. One of her words, “salada,” evokes two meanings, one tending toward the literal and the other to the symbolic; I gave it two terms in the English.

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