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My Favorite Monster and Other Poems by Luis Alberto De Cuenca (review)

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ADITI MACHADO

Material Witness

New York. Nightboat Books. 2024.

80 pages.

ADITI MACHADO'S new collection rekindled the enthusiasm I had felt about *Some Beheadings* (2017) and *Emporium* (2020), her first two books, as well as the literary pamphlet *The End* (2020). It also made me consider how a poet who may be considered "difficult," "challenging," or even the platitudinous "poets' poet" can cultivate a devoted readership, a small tribe of loyal followers who welcome each new book, whether poetry or prose.

Since Machado seems to enjoy such an audience, I wondered what exactly could motivate and explain my and my fellow tribesmen's continuing interest in, and appreciation of, her work. In my case, I realized, it is a deep, problematic, and unique relationship with language. (Problematic in the sense that it constantly and creatively calls language into question, and unique to the extent that it defines a poet's individual and distinctive voice.) Any strong poet (and Machado is definitely one) has the power and the skills to surprise and enthrall us with a language that questions itself, challenging its power to represent and communicate, and ultimately revealing its foreign nakedness. Through this process, a poetic language imbued with the strength and the resolution to come out of its own cultural and ideological closets acquires a new and regenerative eloquence.

Less expansive and discursive than *Emporium*, *Material Witness* nevertheless combines its formal breadth with the pointed concentration of *Some Beheadings*. Each of the six sections presents us with a difference defined by a distinct compositional approach (which finds its own "material witness" in typography and layout) and a smart symmetrical structure. Opening and closing the book are two longer sections mirroring each other (the titles themselves are indicative). Together, "Material Witness" and "Now" provide a hermeneutical frame with their shrewd, sophisticated use of lexical and syntactical ambiguity, which constantly hints at the variability and the

complexity (in fact, the possibility itself) of meaning. "Sometimes experience is phenomenal in its segues—do you remember you were peeling a turnip. / That was some vegetable-colored sky toward which stupefied you grew."



Following "Material Witness" and preceding "Now" are two short poems consisting of twelve ("What Use") and thirteen ("Feeling Transcripts from the Outpost") couplets smartly enjambed and alliterated, their compact metrical structure suggesting an intermediary role between the "outer" and the "inner" layers of the book. Next comes "Bent Record," arguably the least Delphic and the most diverting section of the book: a pseudo-confessional monologue meant (no pun intended) to set the record straight with a litany of hyperbolic statements ("IN STARLIGHT and in the hum of typing I admit it was I") and a darker sense of collective guilt ("I had achieved / my historic high. And I knew just enough / to be toxic to the earth"), in which mankind is depicted as a spoiled teenager or an obnoxious stockbroker ("I lived in directionless desire. Intransigent. Bullish. I ventured out / in viral fields. And I rode my bad scooter which killed the coral reef").

The "IN STARLIGHT" font style brings us to the lapidary gastronomy of "Concerning Matters Culinary," a distillation of fragmental utterances whose Dadaistic cut-up technique, metaphoric playful-

ness, and inscriptional allure attain a sort of experiential wisdom ("I'LL BE MY OWN / STILL FRUIT") if not a wild, mock-Hamletic sagacity ("THERE IS DEATH FOLDED / IN MY MOUSSE TODAY"). Overall, *Material Witness* confirms and expands Machado's striking polyphonic voice, which the returning reader responsively recognizes. And recognition tends to guarantee readerly returns.

Graziano Krätli
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LUIS ALBERTO DE CUENCA

My Favorite Monster and Other Poems

Trans. Gustavo Pérez Firmat. New

Orleans. Diálogos Books. 2024. 115 pages.

MY FAVORITE MONSTER AND OTHER POEMS is a captivating collection of poetry by Luis Alberto de Cuenca (b. 1950, Madrid), one of Spain's best-known and most celebrated contemporary poets. This bilingual edition of poems, selected and translated by scholar Gustavo Pérez Firmat, marks the poetic debut in English by this renowned Spanish poet. Cuenca, a major influence on younger poets, has received numerous prizes for both his scholarly and creative work, including the National Translation Award (1989), the National Poetry Award (2015), and the International Federico García Lorca Poetry Award (2021).

A prolific and multifaceted poet, Cuenca—who holds a doctorate in classical philology—is known for his eclectic range of influences. Drawing inspiration from classical mythology, history, literature, pop culture, comic books, modern myths, cartoons, and films, his works invite readers to contemplate the intersection between the ancient and the modern. The poems Pérez Firmat has selected offer a rich variety of themes and often combine elements of irony, humor, and nostalgia.

As reflected in the hermetic, erudite poetry of his early works, starting in 1971 with his first book of poems, *Los retratos* (Portraits), Cuenca favored the aesthetic known as *culturalismo* that dominated Spanish poetry in the 1970s. His evolution toward intimacy, lyricism, simplicity, and a focus on the communicative

capacity of poetry became evident in 1985 with the publication of *La caja de plata* (The silver box), for which he won the National Critics Award (1986). In the new aesthetic, which Cuenca terms *poesía de línea clara* (poetry with a clear line), the external “visible” cultural references of his early poetry tend to become “invisible” in poems that draw on classical antiquity and pop culture, urban reality, and modern literature:

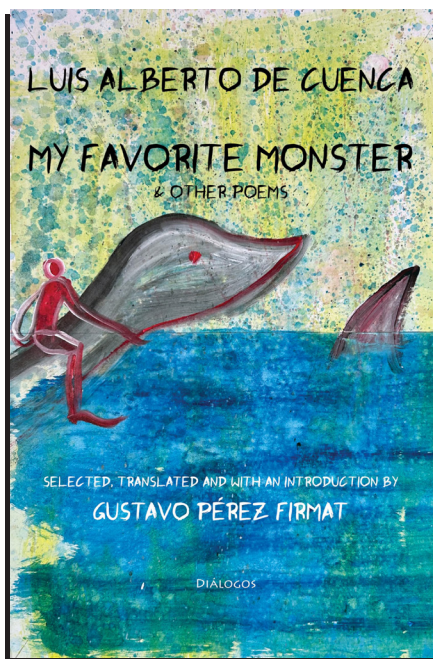
The time has come to write poems
with and about
everything: with Judge Dee’s prose
(so precise, scientific),
with cartoons by Milton Caniff, Frank
Robbins, Alex Raymond,
... with you, of course,
who are reborn day after day from the
foam of my desire, ...
The time has come to write poems
that nourish
so that no one is left hungry after our
last supper.
Poems that abolish night and day.
(“With Everything. About Every
thing”)

As explained by Luis Alberto de Cuenca, *línea clara* is an expression from the world of Franco-Belgian comics, in which, as in works by Hergé or Jacobs, the lines are well delineated, the colors are pure, and the message is free of ambiguities. All the poems in this volume display clear lines; Pérez Firmat’s selection offers a well-balanced representation of *línea clara* poetry. Readers will find poems that address a wide range of subjects—everyday concerns of urban life, fantasies, love, loss, mass culture, the passing of time—and express emotion with an extremely natural language, as in “Eros and Psyche”: “You have no idea how it came to this. / You wake up in the morning / to discover that your furniture is gone.”

Cuenca’s wordplay and subtle nuances add layers of meaning to each poem, inviting readers to unravel the mysteries hidden within. This erudite yet accessible poetry may be enjoyed on multiple levels, resulting, in part, from the intertextual dimension of Cuenca’s poetics. The use of a conversational register, as in “Moses,” creates a sense of intimacy between poet and reader: “Give me your hand. We

have to cross / the river and my strength fails me.”

Pérez Firmat’s informative introduction offers insights into the selection and translation of the poems. Of particular interest are the liberties taken to avoiding literalism while focusing on consistency of tone and intention. Drawing on his background as a poet, Pérez Firmat has rendered metered poems as free verse. As Cuenca himself has stated: “Traducir un poema es escribir un poema nuevo” (Translating a poem is effectively writing a new poem). Pérez Firmat has masterfully navigated the rough seas of literary translation. In re-creating the poems from the source to the target language, he has conveyed the meaning, spirit, and emotion of the original works; for instance, maintaining the rhythm and intensity in “Moses” and the humor in “My Favorite Monster.”



While the book could profit by identifying the works from which all the poems were selected, this bilingual volume is a welcome addition for Spanish literary studies. The poems are published side by side, also making the volume a valuable resource for literary translation courses or workshops.

Overall, *My Favorite Monster and Other Poems* is an excellent compilation that showcases Cuenca’s distinctive lyrical voice and exceptional talent. The selection of poems and Pérez Firmat’s skill-

ful translations make this book an ideal introduction to one of Spain’s most outstanding contemporary poets.

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ANDREA TOMPA

Home

Trans. Jozefina Komporalý. London.
Istros Books. 2024. 360 pages.

ANDREA TOMPA is a Transylvanian Hungarian writer living in Budapest whose novels often deal with Transylvanian themes and with the history of the ethnic Hungarian community in Romania. The present novel is no exception, although the author employs a stratagem to make her narrative more “universal” by avoiding place-names and naming nationalities. One cannot tell whether this will make the book more “sellable” in English-speaking countries; I, for one, have my doubts. A large part of the book relates stories about the fate of former classmates of the author’s secondary school at Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) in Romania who have moved to other countries such as Sweden or the United States, but the narrative also includes a boozy meeting of former schoolmates back in the “native country.”

Is the book mostly about friendship, then? In this respect, Tompa’s message is somewhat ambivalent. She introduces a whimsical character, “always on the go” Ari, the author’s fellow student of Russian literature, who is described in endearing terms. Ari’s nationality is blurred, though that of others can usually be worked out from their first names. At one point we learn more intimate details of the author’s biography, her feelings for a dying painter, and a marriage (enduring or broken?) with a Spaniard, resulting in the appearance of an offspring, “The Son,” a strange, curious, and emotionally distant young man who accompanies Tompa to Transylvania. It is here that he can become acquainted with friends of his mother, middle-aged women with such exotic first names as “Kincső” or (a variant of Agnes) “Ágó.”

After a while, one has the impression that *Home* is simply trying to pose some