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The Uncut Liquor of Autumn

Poems by Blanca Varela

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Blanca Varela

Blanca Varela, born in Lima in 1926, is one of Peru's most notable woman poets of this century. She has published several collections of her work, including *Ese puerto existe* (1959), *Luz de día* (1963), *Valsas y otras falsas confesiones* (1973), *Canto villano* (1978), *Ejercicios materiales* (1991), and *Libro de barro* (1993). Her first book was introduced by Octavio Paz, who aptly noted that Varela is a poet who "knows when to be quiet."

Because Varela does draw energy from what is left unsaid, her poetry plays on the tensions created by ambiguity. She uses stark and sometimes even violent metaphors to deftly oppose sentiment and exacting analysis, solitude and intimacy, irony and lyricism, masculine and feminine, biting humor and unflinching observation. The result is work that is rich and textured, work that persuades her readers to examine our surroundings with a curiosity and a desire for truth that are as intense as the poet's.

Paz notes that Varela's poetry does not attempt to explain or reason. What she strives for is an investigation of the nature of reality and of truth through a vigorous self-interrogation. Her poetry, however, is never confessional. Instead, she relies on individual perception as a means to perceive truth.

Her belief in the primacy of individual perception springs from her surrealist aesthetics, developed in part during the time she spent

in Paris in 1949, where she also became acquainted with and influenced by existentialist thought. Additionally, Varela counts the surrealist poet Emilio Adolfo Westphalen, with whom she cofounded the review, *Amaru*, as one of her major influences.

Las cosas que digo son ciertas

Un astro estalla en una pequeña plaza y un pájaro pierde los ojos y cae. Alrededor de él los hombres lloran y ven llegar la nueva estación. El río corre y arrastra entre sus fríos y confusos brazos la oscura materia acumulada por años y años detrás de las ventanas.

Un caballo muere y su alma vuela al cielo sonriendo con sus grandes dientes de madera manchada por el rocío. Más tarde, entre los ángeles, le crecerán negras y sedosas alas con qué espantar a las moscas.

Todo es perfecto. Estar encerrado en un pequeño cuarto de hotel, estar herido, tirado e impotente, mientras afuera cae la lluvia dulce, inesperada.

¿Qué es lo que llega, lo que se precipita desde arriba y llena de sangre las hojas y de dorados escombros las calles?

The Things I Say Are Certain

A star explodes in a small plaza and a bird loses its eyesight and falls. Nearby men cry and watch the new season arrive. The river runs and between its cold and confused arms it drags the dark matter collected behind windows over years and years.

A horse dies and its soul flies up to heaven, smiling with its great teeth of dew-stained wood. Later, among angels, he will grow black and silky wings to swat flies with.

Everything is perfect. To be enclosed in a small hotel room, to be wounded, lowdown and impotent, while outside the sweet rain falls, unexpected.

What is it that comes now, what rushes from above and fills the leaves with blood, the streets with golden debris?

Sé que estoy enfermo de un pesado mal, lleno de un agua amarga, de una inclemente fiebre que silba y espanta a quien la escucha. Mis amigos me dejaron, mi loro ha muerto ya, y no puedo evitar que las gentes y los animales huyan al mirar el terrible y negro resplandor que deja mi paso en las calles. He de almorzar solo siempre. Es terrible.

I know that I am sick with heaviness, full of bitter water, of merciless fever that whistles and startles those who listen. My friends have left me, my parrot's dead now, and I cannot keep people or animals from fleeing when they see the terrible and black splendor my steps leave in the streets. I always have to eat alone. It's terrible.

La ciudad

La ciudad oprimida por los pájaros,
por su corazón de campana ardiente,
por su corazón agitado como peces sobre espejos de oro,
respira como un árbol frente a la tempestad,
como un niño que arroja piedras para detener al viento,
con su boca de isla abandonada,
con su boca de doncella enardecida por el sol.

La ciudad enorme se agita como un bosque incendiado,
inclinada donde el día se desvanece,
donde el rayo penetra tiernamente en las flores
y consagra sus manos sonoras al amor;
fluye como el cielo en las ramas huecas
y tiembla en los ojos que recogen la pura bebida del otoño.

The City

City, oppressed by its birds,
by its burning-bell heart,
by its heart fluttering like fish on gold mirrors,
breathes, like a tree facing a storm
like a boy who throws stones to hold back the wind,
with his mouth of abandoned island,
with his mouth of maiden inflamed by sun.

The enormous city shakes like a forest on fire
slanting where the day erases,
where the light tenderly penetrates flowers
and devotes its sonorous hands to love;
it flows like the sky through empty branches
and trembles in eyes that take in the uncut liquor of
autumn.

Una ventana

Vuelvo a contar mis dedos.
(La flor helada, la desconocida cabeza que me
 acecha se descuelga y da voces.)
Yo miro las paredes y sus frutos redondos y veloces,
hago cálculos, sumo piedras, cenizas, nubes
y árboles que persiguen a los hombres
y perlas arrancadas de malignos estanques
o de negros pulmones sepultados
y horriblemente vivos.

La araña que desciende a paso humano me conoce,
dueña es de un rincón de mi rostro,
allí anida, allí canta hinchada y dulce
entre su seda verde y sus racimos.
Afuera, región donde la noche crece,
yo le temo,
donde la noche crece y cae en gruesas gotas,
en mortales relámpagos.
Afuera, el pesado aliento del buey,
la vieja fiebre de alas rojas,
la noche que cae
como un resorte oscuro sobre un pecho.

A Window

I return to counting my fingers.
(The frozen flower, the unknown head that
 spies on me suddenly appears and shouts.)
I look at the walls and their fruits, round and quick,
I make calculations, add rocks, ashes, clouds
and trees that pursue men
and pearls pulled from malignant ponds
or lungs, black and buried
and horribly alive.

The spider that descends with human step
knows me, is the mistress of a nook of my face,
nestled there, she sings swollen and sweet
between her green silk and her branches.
Outside, where night grows,
I am afraid,
there where the night grows and falls in fat drops,
in mortal flashes.
Outside, the heavy breath of the ox,
the ancient fever of red wings,
the night falls
like a dark spring over a heart.

Esta oscura flor

Ya no eres mi amado, escapé de tus brazos como esa dulce herrumbre que ahora cae de tus ojos. Angel sin violencia ni lecho, llorarás en la noche sobre tu reino oscuro, sin árboles. Turbio raudal que no herirá la luz, huyo de tus pálidas alas; de tu cuello delgado y transparente, viejo cisne, huyo.

Oh noche sin sentido, tus helados fragmentos no agotaron mi sed. Ya no son nada, árboles y nubes, estas azules plumas que acaricio. Este cristal que antes devolvía su frágil mirada es un helado rostro, vacío, sin objeto.

Ya no es la tempestad, ni el ojo nuevo del arroyo en el follaje, ni la ligera barca, ni la mano luminosa del aire.
Es sólo este astro taciturno, esta oscura flor que gira bajo el cielo, esta hora sorda, este silencio.

This Dark Flower

You are no more my lover, I escaped your arms like that sweet rust that now falls from your eyes. Angel without violence or bed, you will cry at night for your dark, treeless kingdom. Troubled stream that light won't strike, I flee your pale wings; from your thin and transparent neck, old swan, I flee.

Oh senseless night, your icy fragments did not exhaust my thirst. Now they are nothing, trees and clouds, these blue feathers I caress. This mirror that used to return their fragile look is a frozen face, empty, without purpose.

No more storm, nor new eye of rivulet through leaves, nor swift boat, nor luminous palms of air.
Instead, this sullen star, this dark flower that turns beneath the sky, this deaf hour, this silence.

Elegía

Amo la sombra y su desierto, pues en ella habitas y allí sonríen tus fríos labios. Tus negras mejillas arden como las más hermosas lámparas cuando ciego y violento arrojas tus ojos en llamas sobre el mar.

Allí eres perseguido. Huyes como un río del invierno, a través de helados bosques. En tu garganta herida por la luz crece una flor de nieve.

Te veo emerger puro de los palacios en ruina. Reposas tu cabeza, tu pecho oscurecido por la humedad nocturna, el dulce orín que invade tus cabellos, el duro aceite que mana de tus ojos vacíos.

Elegy

I love the darkness and its desert,
since you live within it and there
your cold lips smile. Your black cheeks
burn like the most beautiful lamps
when, blind and violent, you cast flaming
eyes to sea.

There you are pursued. You flee like a winter
river through frozen woods. In your light-wounded
throat a snow flower grows.

I see you emerge untouched from palaces in ruin.
Rest your head, your chest, darkened by
the night's damp, the sweet rust that invades
your hair, the harsh oils that spring from
your empty eyes.

Retrato

Cómo persiste el cuerpo en su tiempo de llama,
cómo es una pequeña joya en la destrucción de la alcoba,
gravitando en los humos altos de esta hora arrebatada.

Cómo cae lleno de peso vivo,
próximo al trajín inerte del hielo en el abrazo,
cómo es un cuchillo que se ordeña y labra
las antiguas virtudes en el hueso.

Entre el cielo y la tierra
hay todo un mundo de húmeda ternura
que colma los zapatos y los lirios.

Ahora, inmensos del moho generoso
que precipita al ebrio entre los ángeles,
se ha reducido el tiempo al párpado deforme
de un dios agreste y pálido,
al dios del sastre muerto en sus tijeras.
Y el cuerpo es perenne vuelo entre las venas,
lienzo débil a la harina,

Portrait

How the body persists in its moments of need,
how like a small gem amidst the bedroom's destruction,
sinking, in the rising fumes of this reckless hour.

How it falls heavy with live weight,
near the slow commotion of ice within an embrace,
how like a knife, exploited and carving
the ancient virtues into bone.

Between heaven and earth
there's a whole world of damp mercies
that fills shoes and lilies full.

Now, immense from the generous rust
that rushes to drunk among angels,
time has been reduced to the deformed eyelid
of a rustic and wan god,
to the god of the tailor, dead on his scissors.
And the body is perennial flight between humors,
faint linen to flour,

al labio que mora en las alfombras bebiendo el paso agudo
o pestaña desgajada, flotando entre los desnudos olores
que se incorporan a las ropas después de haber amado.

Llena la esposa de grumos dulces,
de ciego caracoles anudando sus rostros.

to the mouth that dwells in floors drinking in the sharp step
or the eyelash torn away, floating among the bare odors
that weave themselves into clothes after love.

Fill your love with that sweet grume,
with blind snails winding their heads together.