

“Pedestrian Verses (1915)” de Marta Aponte Alsina¹

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traductora

for Gloria Madrazo

The sewing machine is my dance partner. His trembling sets my body aflame from my fingertips to my toes; his embrace arouses my feet to press the pedal. I'm a machine and I belong to a machine. Our necks merge imperceptibly in a single mass of fleshy hardware. We flutter in flight without brooms. I tickle him with my feet, wearing the embroidered slippers I've had ever since I was a fiesta-loving *maguey* flower of a girl fragrant with the fresh air of these deserts. We dance to his tunes as we sew kerchiefs for my daughter and pockets for my men with the pieces of percale, linen, and muslin—cut with metallic precision—that are left when we have finished dressing the neighbors. Then I darn socks until they are as smooth as these hands that have not stopped dancing since Antonio placed that humble wedding ring on my finger when I was but a girl.

Tonight Antonio takes Manuel to the casino for the first time. That casino is nothing but a silly white man's tradition, I say—with the confidence of many years of marriage—just to annoy him. I myself am white only in appearance, for truly I work harder than old Lupe, who can no longer be our servant now that slavery has been abolished. We can't afford to pay her either, but she still comes when I need her: freedom allows for certain indulgences. I remember when they brought her in from the fields to work in the kitchen—she was already a big girl, but I was only five years old. Lupe was set free. But I am doomed to slavery, so I find that solemn deference of hers amusing: she acts as if life would be not only unjust but a complete muddle without these little white lies.

Down at the venerated casino, descendants of the old Spaniards talk foolish nonsense. Antonio tells me that Pastrana, the chemist at the sugar mill, is the main attraction. At exactly seven o'clock every evening, he commences his ritual of leaning on his elbows on the balcony railing and watching the girls of marriageable age promenade in the town square. Men can set their watches by this nightly curiosity, for Pastrana is the star of a show as predictable as the setting of the sun. That jewel of a man also happens to be courting my daughter, Honoria. If she manages to capture him, the poor girl will have a husband who is disciplined, at least. And as long as the sugar mill is prospering, she won't have to dance with a machine from a musical family.

Singer. How lovely: a language just made for dreaming. The Americans brutally beat the vowels to pap and the consonants to mush so they can swallow it whole. And yet, poetry lives—even among the Yankees. Miss Thompson told me about an extraordinary poetess who was unknown to her compatriots until just a few years ago. This poetess lived a monastic life, sending verse and desserts to her neighbors but never showing her face to them. Miss Thompson appreciates me because I speak and read her language and I am polite to her. Poor woman—living here in this place must be her punishment for the sins of a former life. She has no one to talk to. She tries to teach English to the youngsters, though she meets with less success than an evangelist in hell. They call her a mule and make fun of her, and the street urchins call her an old mare and whinny when she passes by. Even the men declared war on her—when they got tired of trying to seduce her. She lent me a book of verse written by this poetess, the painstakingly detailed verse of a woman who appeared in public only once a year—when her father, who was treasurer of the university, gave a dinner party—and then spent the rest of her time secluded in the attic of her cottage in a cold little village in the middle of a forest. I suppose her neighbors, as the recipients of her occasional offerings, faced the happy dilemma of whether to dismiss her as a crazy woman or fancy her a fairy queen living in their midst.

I write verse, too—while I wind bobbins, cut threads, and turn my lover's beautiful circular handle. But I don't give it away. I don't even let Antonio read it—one poet of renown and one budding poet are enough for this family.

Lupe came early, for I had sent Manuel with a message for her. Despite the fact that he is as morose as a consumptive cat—always!—he is the light of my life and a very good-looking young man. A ringlet tumbles down over his forehead and, though he has his father's small eyes, his full and delicate lips reveal a sensitive man. He writes verse as naturally as a bird sings, and I wish I could keep him from ever having to walk the earth so he would not fall victim to the evil notions the devil spreads in the streets.

Lupe and I have a lot to do today. The moment has come to undertake a mission we have accepted and are trying to look upon as a privilege, as God commands us to do. We set out when Antonio and the boys as well as most of our neighbors are taking a *siesta*. At that hour, even the tiniest lizards—though well adapted to the sultry climate of this coast strewn with fallow fields and steaming swamps—must reduce their heart rate so as not to suffer a stroke. But we two old ladies have learned to move about like the dead, and thus we slip away—silent, hungry souls—to begin the search.

Endowed with a piranha's methodical passion, we can find flesh on a dry bone: one man's trash is another man's treasure. But today's trash certainly isn't anything like it used to be. Not long after Manuel was born seventeen years ago, the Yankees came. And ever since then, you can't get those glass demijohns in which we used to plant miniature gardens; and nor are there many of those brass platters we used to use for serving codfish—still our sustenance on occasion. Instead, there are the larger items made for a country of giants. Pastrana would be envious of our Lilliputian ingenuity with these colossal castoffs and the way we avail ourselves of what the piranha has left behind—though I do fear that if he ever found out about my escapades, Honoria would lose her jewel.

We cross the plaza and enter the church that lost its roof in the last storm. People dump their life's refuse here in the abandoned courtyard now—just as they used to deposit

the murmur of their guilt in the obscurity of the confessional. Lupe looks around, then fixes on my gaze, as I do on hers; because we know each other so well, we can economize on words. We make a mental inventory—measuring and weighing items without touching them, smelling their state of decay, envisioning new uses for them in light of our needs. And dear old Lupe knows mine even better than her own. Poor woman. If she were forced to see herself in the mirror of her reality, as I am, constantly...but she walks through the waste with dignity, like some phantom queen, sweet-talking the cockroaches, while I keep my distance to protect my white-woman status.

In a corner we find what we are looking for. And our hearts leap within us as a window is thrown open on memories of our younger years when lovers desired us and we went out to meet them. It takes us a minute to snatch ourselves back from such dangerous musings. My thoughts turn to Antonio and Manuel gallantly entering and leaving the casino. Antonio will come tumbling into my bed, spent and saddened. But Manuel will linger for a moonlight stroll, and his eyes will meet the eyes of the most beautiful girl in town, and the worlds they both carry inside will be unlocked—worlds like the infinite universe of an attic, worlds far removed from this godforsaken place.

We piranhas are the devil: half an hour is more than enough time for our mind's eye to transfigure our neighbors' wretched garbage. We get back to the house just as Antonio is waking up and calling from the bed for the glass of unsweetened tamarind juice with which he crowns the labor of his *siesta*. Then he leaves for the school and today, luckily, has his son in tow. Manuel needs the social contact (which his father gets too much of) more than the money (which slips through his father's fingers). Fortune seems to enjoy mocking my old man—snickering insolently like that fat soprano of his fantasies.

Lupe has stayed behind, crouched on the balcony. She doesn't like to enter the house, not even if it's raining and not even when Antonio implores her not to humiliate him with such displays of servility (he's a Mason and was a republican under the Spanish regime). As soon as they leave and she sees that there might be fewer people in the street, she steals away, hugging the walls. Singer laughs through my guts as we watch her from the window. Then, in the language of his maker, I recite for Singer some verse I read last night. I like it because it's short; I cannot read anything lengthy without falling asleep.

It doesn't take Lupe long at all. Strangely enough, she is ours until three in the afternoon and not a moment longer. Then she bolts for who knows where—to those woods where her people have always hidden, I suspect. It's as if they all die with the sun in the evening and are reincarnated every morning—witnesses to our misery, fairy godmothers of our hunger. One of these days I swear I'm going to get up the courage and follow her. She deposits the package at my feet and vanishes without even a goodbye before I can stop dancing and get up.

I see that it's the very same cardboard box we saw at the church dump. Most likely some stunning, first-class shoes that button all the way up to the ankle and have that delicate scent that doesn't remind you of the calf—the kind my men can't even dream of now—made their journey in this box. It's a thick cardboard box, but in these hands of mine that are used to cutting wood for the stove, its days are numbered. I use the pocketknife that belonged to my grandfather, which I have managed to hold on to against great odds—I pretend not to notice when Antonio, half covetous and half scared, eyes it.

I know by heart the size and shape of my men's feet and draw a perfect outline of them. Sitting down at the dining room table, I admire my work: thick cardboard insoles that I will insert in Manuel's riddled shoes and Antonio's vagabond boots so they can traverse the two hundred steps from our house to the casino like a couple of dandies. They will walk the soft path not with gratitude but rather with resignation to this reworking of their poverty. I will watch them go, with relief. Honoria will have gone to meet friends at the fountain on the square. And then the evening silence will burst in upon me, and I will begin to enjoy my solitude. Years ago, I used to envy men because the pinnacles always belonged to them and they could ascend to heights that women could not. But now I'm content just to sit here on the balcony, reflecting upon Pastrana's appearance at the railing and proclaiming the privileges of poverty with a belly laugh.

Suddenly it occurs to me that the work is not finished: those feet need wings! Once Antonio applauded my attempt at translating Mrs. Browning. And now the lent book invites leafing and falls open to some verse that checks an incipient bitterness. So I will not sew any more today, and I have just enough time before I must stoke the fire in the kitchen stove and get back to the household chores.

I approach Antonio's well-organized desk where pencils, pens, and sheets of paper—all gifts from his friend who owns the print shop—are so nicely arranged that we move about this piece of furniture as if we were in a church. He knows that I borrow from it and even encourages me, but my mediocre verse cannot begin to compare with his that resounds with the peal of the great bell.

Unbeknownst to them, when my two men make their entrance at the casino tonight, they will be walking on words stolen from a Yankee poetess. And she never would have suspected—for she never would have imagined a family of ragtag poets like mine, much less this pedestrian way of commemorating her talent.

I translate eight lines, which in my handwriting—wandering like its destiny—become nine, and write them on the cardboard surface, distributing poetry between Manuel's left foot and Antonio's right. And as he skirts the desert of hopelessness, Antonio's right foot, like his hunger-ravaged body, will falter:

*"Heaven" is what I cannot reach!
The apple on the tree,
Provided it do hopeless hang,
That "heaven" is—to me!*

But the ground Manuel treads is a point of departure:

*The color, on the cruising cloud,
The interdicted ground
Behind the hill,
The house behind,
There Paradise is found!*

¹ Esta traducción es del relato de Aponte Alsina que se titula “Versos Pedestres (1915)” (*La casa de la loca y otros relatos*. San Juan: Alfaguara/Editorial Santillana, Inc., 2001. 107-114). Los once relatos de esta obra sugieren los choques y fusiones formativos de la frontera cultural entre Puerto Rico y Estados Unidos. “Versos Pedestres (1915)” toma como punto de partida los personajes y las situaciones de la obra *Litoral*, novela autobiográfica del gran poeta puertorriqueño Luis Palés Matos (1898-1959) e intenta ser una parodia de la prosa de la época, que entonces era muy grandilocuente y pomposa. El hijo de quien habla la protagonista representa a Palés Matos, cuya obra revolucionó las formas expresivas de la literatura puertorriqueña.