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*First Poem for Her and Poem for My Shadow* by Marie-Célie  
**Agnant**

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Corine Tachtiris  
First Poem for Her

Marie-Célie Agnant  
Premier poème pour elle

she wanted to be dawn she wanted to be spring  
she wanted to be wind stone  
and water  
but she was just a tree waging war  
against its branches  
her life a broken clock  
a motionless clock  
at the window

she thought of love as her due  
refused to accept the journey's end  
halfheartedly she murmured:  
“a time for everything”  
but she was always offering  
she offered her heart  
as a doormat or a spittoon  
with a feeling of fearsome bliss

they told her pond  
she cried ocean  
hands stretched out she made for shore  
her arms clawed the void  
pitiable  
she sank into the sludge

however much she closed her eyes  
convinced herself that the waters were blue  
that the waters were clear  
all that resurfaced in her  
was the certainty of her weakness  
the deep bitterness of shame  
the excruciating pain of time

the calm water gently lapping  
she would sit

her face streaming with tears  
distraught  
waiting for a miracle

above all she feared and hated tornadoes  
desires disheveled

flooded river  
running over on all sides  
inside her  
despite her

so as not to lose face  
then  
she clenched her teeth  
simply moaned  
moaned  
biting her fists  
gently moaned  
like a wounded dog  
begging for a few lousy pats  
a dog  
at the foot of the table

ever since her hair had taken on  
that stormy hue  
she had lost her bearings  
incessantly counted and recounted  
the rosary of the years  
drank from a water deprived of light  
blowing without conviction  
on the tinder of a back-parlor passion  
a damp and lifeless passion

she would see a pond and  
like an idiot would smile  
crinkle up her eyes in pleasure  
she would say arms outstretched  
let's go to the sea to look at the boats

she never lost hope  
for that grand crossing  
dreamed of the open sea  
of brave sailors  
she crinkled her eyes smiled  
and her misty hair  
called to mind a frantic garden  
the garden of a madwoman fighting her last battle  
convinced that love is her due

Corine Tachtiris  
Poem for My Shadow

Marie-Célie Agnant  
Poème pour mon ombre

when around dreams  
the mists grow hazy  
gray or golden bronze  
disenchantment remains

palms skyward to confront renunciation

appeal if your heart tells you  
to women who tell fortunes  
entreat them to retell  
the marvel  
the miracles  
beg for giddy spells  
lying face-down curse the sirens' song

there is a man they always say  
looking at you  
looking at us  
love is there  
it was there  
at the beginning  
it was

soon enough you'll learn  
the weight of thirst  
freshwater hydra with bitter flesh  
shapeless rock  
heavily  
at your very core

from organic matter  
soon enough you'll be  
inert matter  
will become  
from a whole  
will become  
won't be  
but  
anything but

nothing but  
sparse fragments

time continues on its way  
endless voyage  
no land in sight

stubbornness is often a tenacious enemy

reinvent if you can the first glimmers  
relearn if you wish desire  
but most of all

invite your shadow to keep you company

Marie-Célie Agnant was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and has lived in Montreal since 1970. She is the author of four novels (*La Dot de Sara*, 1995; *Le Livre d'Emma*, 2001; *Un Alligator nommé Rosa*, 2007; *Femmes au temps des carnassiers*, 2015), a collection of short stories (*Le Silence comme le sang*, 1997), and two collections of poetry (*Balafres*, 1994; *Et puis parfois quelquefois...*, 2009) as well as various books for young readers. Her work has appeared in translation in English, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, and Korean.

Agnant's poems caught my attention for their successful combination of politics and aesthetics; for their stance against sexism, racial discrimination, and other forms of social injustice; for the strong female voice that emerges, pronouncing not only words of protest but also of tenderness and passion; for the sometimes sly, ironic humor that slides in and prevents the poetry from becoming overly grandiose or cliché. The poems here from *Et puis parfois quelquefois...* do not fall under Agnant's political poetry but rather her representations of women's experiences, which often involve confident assertions of female desire as well as longing and loss.

In translating these two poems which express the often unfulfilled drive for love and companionship, my aim was to avoid slipping into a maudlin tone. The best strategy I found was to follow Agnant's oscillations between bitterness and sympathy, between the acerbic and the tender, which undercut one another to keep the poems from falling too deeply into either side. This is exemplified, for example, in the "fearsome bliss" (*bonheur terrifiant*) of the subject of the first poem.

Agnant also often uses repetition with variation, playing around a few words in compact lines such as: *de matière vivante / très tôt tu seras / matière inerte / deviendras / d'un tout / deviendras / ne seras / que / plus que / rien que / fragments épars*. Translating these lines, fragmented themselves, proved to be one of the main challenges of the poems. While I tried to keep the meaning and the sense of repetition with variation, the rhythmic quality of these lines was also important to me, and I decided to allow the English a rhythm of its own. The *plus que / rien que* thus became "anything but / nothing but." In this regard, I am most pleased with the translation of *en elle / malgré elle* as "inside her / despite her" which gains a near rhyme and a clearer rhythm to compensate for other places in the translation where these qualities were sacrificed to meaning.