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

Corine Tachtiris

University of Massachusetts - Amherst, tachtco@umich.edu

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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

Commentary

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.