

RESISTENCIA

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POEMS OF PROTEST AND REVOLUTION

INTRODUCTION BY **JULIA ALVAREZ**

EDITED BY **MARK EISNER & TINA ESCAJA**



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DICEN LOS VIEJOS BARDOS

*No lo olvides, poeta.
En cualquier sitio y época
en que hagas o en que sufras la Historia,
siempre estará acechándote algún poema peligroso.*

—Heberto Padilla, Cuba

THE OLD BARDS SPEAK

*Don't forget it, poet.
Whatever the place and time
in which you make or suffer History,
there will always be a dangerous poem waiting to ambush you.*

—translated by Mark Strand

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REBEL WORDS

There is a strong and vibrant tradition in the Americas of a poetry of witness. This should come as no surprise in a hemisphere carved out of violence, wrested from the Indigenous, built on the backs of the enslaved, the conquered, the murdered, the raped. Often all that was left to the powerless was the power of testimony; the only rebellion possible was that of the rebel word, to quote the title of Raquel Verdesoto de Romo Dávila's poem included in this anthology. Even when nothing remained but walls erected to prohibit passage, to imprison and entomb, to serve as backdrops for firing squads, those walls became the printing presses of the poor. Scrawled on them were messages voicing resistance and giving hope. To this day the tradition persists. On one wall recently photographed at the border between Mexico and the United States, a message reads: *They tried to bury us. They did not know we were seeds.*

This anthology is evidence of the flowering of those seeds.

"The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting," the novelist Milan Kundera once wrote, and it is a struggle with deep roots in the southern reaches of this hemisphere, a struggle that continues to this day (turn on the news) and is powerfully audible in this anthology. "The South also exists . . . where memory / omits no memories," Mario Benedetti reminds the forgetful North

in his wry poem “El Sur también existe.” El Norte might consider such notions “magical realism,” fanciful theories for academics to parse out—like Papa Hegel in René Depestre’s poem, who understands

the laws and secrets of humanity’s
great history, but he has no brother’s
eyes for the bleak veins running
in panic in the wood of black woe.

But in the poems of these poets from el Sur, the dead, the forgotten, the voiceless and faceless rise up. Pablo Neruda refuses to bury his poetry’s head in the nostalgic imagery “of dreams, of the leaves, / of the great volcanoes of his native land.” He will not be silenced, whether the struggle is in his native Chile or with his brother poets in the Spanish Civil War. “Come and see the blood in streets, / come and see / the blood in the streets, / come and see the blood / in the streets!” he shouts at the end of “I Explain Some Things.” As if answering that summons, Julia de Burgos rises up, “I felt myself a blossom of all the soils of the earth, / of the soils without history.” Yes, the land, too, speaks (Óscar Cerruto’s *Altiplano*, Ernest Pépin’s *Guadeloupe*), along with mahogany trees and rushing rivers. Don’t fool yourselves, Ernesto Cardenal warns, “Not only humans longed for liberation.”

Memory is, in fact, the South’s most powerful and plentiful resource. “The poor are many / and so / it’s impossible to forget them,” Roberto Sosa writes. Together they are a force that cannot be defeated.

They can
carry on their shoulders
the coffin of a star.

They can
destroy the air like furious birds,
to blot out the sun.

The danger comes when the poor are “unaware of their treasures.” But the poems remind us.

The witness borne in these pages can sometimes feel overwhelming. On one read-through I marked the margins of the index with a tiny cross for every writer who had been murdered, tortured, exiled, or had succumbed to despair and suicide. The pages looked like a cemetery. But turn to the poems themselves, and the poets are resurrected, their voices defiant, alive, presente! Víctor Jara, arrested and corralled in a stadium with hundreds of other students and teachers, later shot forty-four times, his musician hands crushed, keeps on singing in his poem “Estadio Chile.” In his moving documentary *Pablo Neruda! Presente!*, Mark Eisner, one of the editors of this anthology, recounts the story of the poet’s funeral in Santiago. Unable to mount a demonstration because of the military takeover, mourners marched behind the coffin instead, ten thousand strong, shouting the phrase “Neruda, presente!” With each entry in *Resistencia*, the chorus grows: Vallejo, presente! Césaire, presente! Storni, presente! Dalton, presente! Vilariño, presente! On and on and on. It is a thrilling experience of solidarity to read these pages.

One of the strengths of this anthology is its radical inclusiveness. Editors Tina Escaja and Mark Eisner have assembled

a diverse brigada Americana, armed with weapons of mass creation. Here the reader will encounter well-known poets (Neruda, Vallejo, Mistral, Césaire), as well as lesser-known ones—at least to this reader (Evaristo, Cuevas Cob, Galván, Chihuailaf). There are voices that have been traditionally excluded, even at times in leftist literary circles: the voices of women; Indigenous voices; the voices of those with different sexual orientations; voices from across Latin America as well as the Caribbean: poets writing not just in Spanish, but in French, Portuguese, Kreyòl, Quechua, Mapudungun. Humor and irony and sassiness abound: Reina María Rodríguez wrests the mythic apple from Eve and gives it instead to her daughter so that she won't be cowed, impoverished, kept in the dark—so that “she won't turn out like me”; José Leonel Rugama enumerates the mounting cost of space exploration in a seemingly simple and childlike counting poem, then juxtaposes this expense with the mounting hunger of the Acahualincan people, which has resulted in their extinction—but no matter: “Blessed are the poor for they shall inherit the moon”; Rei Berroa writes gleefully about the poetic justice of doves landing on the statues of tyrants and dictators, leaving behind a mantle of poop!

Ultimately, what comes through is not a graveyard of poems by victims or about victimhood, but a chorus of love and hope. This is important as we continue to face the forces that would drown out and negate this chorus: there is no stopping this river of voices, these currents of song. “Listen to me!” Miguel Otero Silva writes in “Sowing”:

I aspire for us to live
in the vibrant voices of morning.

I want to remain together with you
in the deep sap of humanity

To read through these poems is to be reminded again and again
of our true allegiance to each other. That is where Bertalicia
Peralta takes us in her astonishing poem “The Only Woman”:

the only woman, the only one that she can be
is the one who, aching and clean, decides for herself
to leave her prehistory behind.

Walking “tall and true,” this new woman “unlearns the alphabet
of submission” and “frees herself through the fullness of love.”
She leads us beyond resistance and struggle to what would in-
deed be a promised land, not located in any one country in
the hemisphere, but in that “Altiplano sin fronteras,” that high
plain without borders, which is another name for love.

—Julia Alvarez
2019

GABRIELA MISTRAL

LITTLE FEET

for Doña Isaura Dinator

Children's little feet,
blue with cold,
how can they see you and not cover you
dear Lord!

Little feet battered
by every stone,
abused by snow
and mud!

Man, blind, does not see
that in your wake
you leave
a flower of living light;

that where you set
your small bleeding sole,
the tuberose blooms more
sweetly.

Be heroic as you walk
the straight paths,
for you are
perfect.

Children's little feet,
two small suffering jewels,
how can people pass right by
and not see you!

translated by Jessica Powell

Editors' note: In the Spanish original, Mistral employs a specific rhyme scheme that makes the poem sound like a lullaby. Though it means the loss of some of this melodiousness, for the English translation we have decided not to maintain the rhyme scheme, as to do so would excessively distort the poem's original meaning. However, we do suggest you read the original to hear that melody, even if you don't understand Spanish well.

PIECECITOS

a doña Isaura Dinator

Piececitos de niño,
azulosos de frío,
¡cómo os ven y no os cubren,
Dios mío!

¡Piececitos heridos
por los guijarros todos,
ultrajados de nieves
y lodos!

El hombre ciego ignora
que por donde pasáis,
una flor de luz viva
dejáis;

que allí donde ponéis
la plantita sangrante,
el nardo nace más
fragante.

Sed, puesto que marcháis
por los caminos rectos,
heroicos como sois
perfectos.

Piececitos de niño,
dos joyitas sufrientes,
¡cómo pasan sin veros
las gentes!

MASS

At the end of the battle,
the combatant dead, a man approached him
and said to him: "Don't die, I love you so much!"
But the corpse, alas! kept on dying.

Two more came up to him and repeated:
"Don't leave us! Be brave! Come back to life!"
But the corpse, alas! kept on dying.

Twenty, a hundred, a thousand, five hundred thousand appeared,
crying out: "So much love, and no power against death!"
But the corpse, alas! kept on dying.

Millions of individuals surrounded him,
with a common plea: "Don't leave us, brother!"
But the corpse, alas! kept on dying.

Then, all the inhabitants of the earth
surrounded him; the corpse looked at them sadly, deeply moved;
he got up slowly,
embraced the first man; started to walk . . .

MASA

Al fin de la batalla,
y muerto ya el combatiente, vino hacia él un hombre
y le dijo: “No mueras, te amo tanto!”
Pero el cadáver ¡ay! siguió muriendo.

Se le acercaron dos y repitiéronle:
“No nos dejes! ¡Valor! ¡Vuelve a la vida!”
Pero el cadáver ¡ay! siguió muriendo.

Acudieron a él veinte, cien, mil, quinientos mil,
clamando: “¡Tanto amor y no poder nada contra la muerte!”
Pero el cadáver ¡ay! siguió muriendo.

Le rodearon millones de individuos,
con un ruego común: “¡Quédate, hermano!”
Pero el cadáver ¡ay! siguió muriendo.

Entonces, todos los hombres de la tierra
le rodearon; les vió el cadáver triste, emocionado;
incorporóse lentamente,
abrazó al primer hombre; echóse a andar . . .

ALFONSINA STORNI

YOU WANT ME WHITE

You want me light,
Like sea-foam you want me,
like mother-of-pearl.
That I be a lily
Chaste, above all lilies.
A delicate perfume.
Closed corolla.

No moonbeam
Has passed through me.
No daisy
Calls herself my sister.
You want me snow,
You want me white,
You want me dawn.

You who had all
The cups at hand,
Lips purple
From honey and fruit.
You who at the banquet
Covered with vines
Abandoned your flesh
Celebrating Bacchus.
You who in the black

Gardens of Deceit
Dressed in red
Spread Havoc.

You whose skeleton
Remains intact
By what miracles
I still don't know,
You desire me white
(God forgive you),
You desire me chaste
(God forgive you),
You desire me dawn!

Flee to the forest;
Go to the mountains;
Cleanse your mouth;
Live in a hut;
Touch with your hands
The damp earth;
Feed your body
With bitter roots;
Drink from the rocks;
Sleep on frost;
Renew your tissues
With saltpeter and water;
Speak with the birds
And arise at dawn.

And when your flesh
Has been transformed,
And when into it
You've put your soul
Which in bedrooms
Remained entangled,
Then, good man,
Ask me to be white,
Ask me to be snow,
Ask me to be chaste.

translated by Barbara Paschke

TÚ ME QUIERES BLANCA

Tú me quieres alba,
Me quieres de espumas,
Me quieres de nácar.
Que sea azucena
Sobre todas, casta.
De perfume tenue.
Corola cerrada.

Ni un rayo de luna
Filtrado me haya.
Ni una margarita
Se diga mi hermana.
Tú me quieres nívea,
Tú me quieres blanca,
Tú me quieres alba.

Tú que hubiste todas
Las copas a mano,
De frutos y mieles
Los labios morados.
Tú que en el banquete
Cubierto de pámpanos
Dejaste las carnes
Festejando a Baco.
Tú que en los jardines

Negros del Engaño
Vestido de rojo
Corriste al Estrago.

Tú que el esqueleto
Conservas intacto
No sé todavía
Por cuáles milagros,
Me pretendes blanca
(Dios te lo perdone),
Me pretendes casta
(Dios te lo perdone),
¡Me pretendes alba!

Huye hacia los bosques;
Vete a la montaña;
Límpiate la boca;
Vive en las cabañas;
Toca con las manos
La tierra mojada;
Alimenta el cuerpo
Con raíz amarga;
Bebe de las rocas;
Duerme sobre escarcha;
Renueva tejidos
Con salitre y agua;
Habla con los pájaros
Y lévate al alba.

Y cuando las carnes
Te sean tornadas,
Y cuando hayas puesto
En ellas el alma
Que por las alcobas
Se quedó enredada,
Entonces, buen hombre,
Preténdeme blanca,
Preténdeme nívea,
Preténdeme casta.