



Polifonía sobre rieles / Polyphony on the Rails

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Introduction and translation into English by

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Introduction:

With her poem “Polyphony on the Rails,” Consuelo Hernández won the 2011 Antonio Machado Train Award for Poetry, among more than one thousand two hundred participants from twenty nine countries. Thus, when she first approached me with the task of translating her poem, I felt honored to be able to collaborate with her on such a special project. At the same time, I had almost no prior experience with translation of poetry, and was uncertain about how to begin the process. In the end, it was a series of trial and errors through which Consuelo Hernández guided me and, overall, an educational experience where we both learned more about Spanish and English together.

I began translating by reading the poem several times to get a feel for the rhythm and context. As it is broken down into four sections, I translated the verses one section and stanza at a time. One of the more difficult aspects of this translation was capturing the imagery Consuelo Hernández uses through various metaphors in that several words do not have equivalents in English. This made certain expressions more complicated to convey; for example, “besos peregrinos.” Another example is the metaphor that compares the train tracks to the strings of a violin. In these instances, I would make a first attempt to translate the verse as I understood it. If there were any misinterpretations, Consuelo would then explain the idea she wanted to express. For this reason, we spent a great deal of time discussing the different ways to transmit some of her more complex verses. It was not only challenging translating the concepts within the poem, but also finding the appropriate words that would conserve the rhythm in English.

Moreover, Consuelo Hernández intimately recreates her travels on the railway, passing through various countries in Latin America, Europe and Asia. While I believe many of the experiences associated with travel are universal and highly relatable, there are

many cultural aspects with which I was unfamiliar never having traveled in India, Colombia or Peru. In these situations, the poet would describe in great detail the exact emotion or imagery she was trying to describe in Spanish. I then contemplated the best way to transmit the same expression in English both culturally and linguistically.

When the initial translation was complete, Consuelo Hernández and I sent the poem back and forth trying to fine-tune and edit each individual segment we thought could be improved. In the final stages, I repeatedly reviewed the poem in its entirety to ensure that it preserved the original feeling and intent, and at the same time, was a new literary work itself in English. Translating “Polyphony on the Rails” was a great learning experience and I am pleased with the outcome. I am additionally grateful that Consuelo entrusted one of her greatest works to me so I could participate in the process and learn more about her travels on the railway.

Polifonía sobre rieles*

I

Cuento los minutos nerviosos del reloj
 los transeúntes esperan el tren
 cuadernos de ruta, destino transitorios
 la turba citadina y la gritería de los vendedores
 dulces, tus besos peregrinos en la topografía de mi piel
 un adiós humedecido por la brisa.

Subo al vagón, la fuga de otro viaje
 sin escafandras para navegar mis propósitos
 busco una porción de mi destino
 el fragor estrepitoso borra el horizonte de mi primavera tórrida
 viajo la tristeza, atravieso despedidas
 y huyo con la veloz complicidad ferroviaria...

Entre pasajeros atropellados por imágenes
 soy un hilo en la red de circunstancias
 con sabor a peligro colombiano o israelí
 voces que modulan un mar de incertidumbres
 de rostros que se diluyen en la niebla...

Vuelve el amor con precisión del guardagujas
 danza el sol sus grafías sobre rieles
 otra vía láctea rota en mis arterias
 busco la estación de la victoria en fronteras imaginarias
 en pasajeros que suben y bajan
 en hoteles anónimos, en conciertos callejeros...

Otra vez me despierta el bochorno tropical
 los vallenatos de la época, *la casa en el aire*
 un paisaje aún virgen de miradas
 bajo el cielo claro que muerde la costumbre
 la fiesta de la vida en las espigas
 alegre el mar en la borrasca de mi risa
 avanzo en esta polifonía sobre rieles
 poblada de sueños bipartitos.

* El poema en español fue publicado en *Premios del tren "Antonio Machado" 2011*. Madrid: Fundación de Ferrocarriles Españoles, 2011. p 127-129.

Estación tras estación un amor ocasional
 paisajes luminosos, otra pausa erótica
 otro punto de partida sin andén exacto de llegada
 trafica mis puentes tu árbol de deseos
 se deleita el tren de la locura en mis cavernas
 nos invade el estertor de la dicha
 atrás queda la soledad y las gélidas aguas
 somos puente-tren-túnel gozoso
 en la vía férrea olorosa a sudor y a perfume
 inundada por las lenguas de la tierra

renazco en mitad del camino
 soy cráter en explosión, volcán y lava
 me tatúo de nostalgias, de huellas
 de amantes alucinados, de anacoretas
 de lugares que nunca vi, ciudades por donde pasé dormida
 mi urgente sed de agua de coco, de los frutos de tu especie.

Me despierta una explosión de trinos y plumajes
 las mujeres en su lucha cotidiana
 los muchachos de uniformes a la escuela
 los cultivos de caña, de cafetos...
 y te quedas perdido en la estación, tu jean y tu mochila
 atravesado con mi misma incertidumbre
 y la puerta se cierra bajo un sol vicioso de la parada matinal.

II

En el ferrocarril de la costa tropical siempre es verano
 lo esperamos en el calor rabioso de las dos la tarde
 Santa Marta dormida y Valledupar en siesta
 abandonamos la efímera felicidad de porros y cumbias
 en los extramuros los adolescentes se inauguran (zoofilia)
 el tren se anuncia bajo un cielo de cables óseos
 de goterones de lluvia sobre las motos de la época
 y el kiosco solitario que exhibe mandíbulas de tiburón vencido.

Sin movernos escapamos al corazón de la campiña
 en la sala, el granero con candado guarda historias inéditas
 reposa el labriego al final de su jornada
 desfilan los árboles en la quietud de la tarde
 nos adormece el monótono treno (taca taca, puf puf)
 jadeante penetras mi campo alborozado
 agitan pañuelos rojos
 horadas mis túneles y te derrites en la perenne herida

desciendes embriagado de abismos
 otros abordan transidos por ausencias
 cumplen su destino como páginas que pasan de un gran libro
 y tú limpias la tierra de tristes hojarascas
 nos derrochamos en el fuego del verano
 nos embriagan los acordes de una cantina lejana
 de parejas ebrias que se desafían a muerte.

Suave el viento trae la caricia de la madre al despedirse
 el resplandor ilumina la ventana
 una silueta que dejamos en la puerta
 la cicatriz del sol en el estanque...

¡ah! mi ferrocarril rumbo a todos mis puntos cardinales
 transitorios andenes de la vida
 empañando de partidas mis espejos
 el vagón se llena de peregrinos
 y otro ritmo viborea en mi sangre.

Un nuevo amor, otra estación
 voy cantando tu piel, palpando tu ternura
 perimetrando tus concavidades
 aprendiendo a vivir a contrapunto.

Se abren las puertas, te detienes, me detengo
 las ofertas de jugo de caña, obleas y agua de coco
 los rieles de violín interpretan paisajes ignorados
 madrugan los animales del establo

las mujeres a sus quehaceres y los hombres al campo
 y en mi morral de adioses, un olor a tristeza

el ángel sostiene una linterna intermitente
 y los hombres que amo se izan como estatuas
 en la memoria de mis interludios sobre rieles.

III

La taquilla se atiborra de viajeros y mendigos
 de Lima a Huancayo en el ferrocarril de la Oroya
 el frío avaricioso de los Andes
 perseguimos el curso de los ríos
 nunca tantos puentes en un viaje, tanto pánico al cruzar el Infiernillo
 tanta oscuridad de túneles y zigzags escoltados por la muerte

en los rieles de Miggs donde antes caminaban llamas
 la estación lujuriosa de Galera y por fin Huancayo
 el asombro ante las líneas Nazcas
 la ciudad blanca, es Arequipa
 y otra vez el tren al Puno milenario de chuyos y ponchos
 la vista esplendorosa desde el Kuntur Wasi
 el cóndor que ya nunca más podrá volar

en caballitos de totora bogamos las aguas del Titicaca
 al Kumbha Mela vamos con sobrio equipaje de renunciantes
 al Valle Sagrado de los Incas, al río Urubamba, Cuzco, Pisac, Machu Picchu
 bebemos té de coca para el mal de altura
 de una cultura intacta en silencio abrumante
 como humo de las chimeneas, la noche viene al encuentro

espacios íntimos, ¿es arte? o ¿es historia?
 estación tras estación pensamientos distintos
 aptitudes distintas, costumbres distintas
 nos orillan hacia un álbum de misterios
 de pueblos hilvanados de ojos húmedos
 coche cama, restaurante, camareros obsequiosos
 estancias de llamas y alpacas
 galpones de lana, cultivos de papa
 paradores indígenas sobre piedras que hablan del altiplano Andino
 de la jauría en la noche pánico
 un mutismo multicolor que nos deja perplejos
 el siempre verde árbol de su imaginación
 que ante la lluvia ácida ha resistido y calla...

El ferrocarril de la Oroya deja huella en mis fugas
una avalancha de dudas nos ahoga
nos convertiremos en estrellas, en agujeros negros
o en la nieve iluminada de una noche de luna...

el tren desata un canto que dice sus urgencias
un lamento descarrilado de seres lejanos
que en la oscuridad cumplen su último deseo
y no hay tiempo para saber quiénes son...

me embriago en lejanías saboreando nostalgias secretas
el gusano feroz se derrocha en sombras del túnel
anticipamos la estación para compartir el vino
el encuentro definitivo, un alto en la vida cotidiana
damos vueltas y vueltas sobre la piel terrenal
tú devoras las corolas de las flores, yo bebo el agua de los lirios
y nos declaramos discípulos del vértigo.

Otra estación sobre los rieles de mi vida
abordo el Rajdhani Express de Bombay a Nueva Delhi
cambio dólares por rupias, la emoción no cabe en mi cuerpo
el hormiguero humano de la estación central
duerme, se sienta en el piso, deambula en un halo de olores especiosos,
en los vagones un rumor de lenguas ignoradas

el tren es cuerpo poblado de otros cuerpos
con un pasado que insiste en visitarnos
y una quimera que nos impulsa siempre a irnos
crece el musgo, nos perdemos en el enredo del anzuelo
en Basilea, Paris, Madrid, Macondo

vivo mi propia vía dolorosa
cicatrices legibles llevo en los carriles rotos
en la fisuras que me dejó la nieve
me duermo arrullada por el pasto
me desplazo por miles de silencios
horado cientos de oscuridades
mastico las hojas de betel
y llego a la ciudad cósmica de Rishikesh.

Las aguas del Ganges me curan viejas heridas
los amantes se entregan al amor clandestino a media noche
vienen y van por los vagones hablando del azar
las madres silencian a sus bebés

los hombres meditan en amores suspendidos
los amigos de juegos infantiles
gente que se queda... que se va
el dolor de todo lo dejado...

se dibuja la luna en los cristales, no preciso la hora
rencores en los hombres, penas de las mujeres
fábulas completas desfilan por su mente
el tren avanza y la noche sale de sus ruedas
algunos viajan mirando atrás, otros adelante
yo voy de sur a norte por mis vías férreas
sepulto mi SUEÑO en señales misteriosas
me siento tren, conductor, y carrilera
destino, estación, túnel y puente

y si quieres, te invito a que me abordes.

Polyphony on the rails

I

I count the nervous minutes on the clock
 passers-by await the train
 travel guides at hand, temporary destinations
 the city-dwelling swarm and the clamor of the vendors
 sweet are your fleeting kisses on the contours of my skin
 a tearful farewell in the breeze.

I board the train, the escape of another journey
 without a diving suit to navigate my intentions
 I search for a part of my destiny
 the noisy din erases the horizon of my torrid springtime
 I travel with sadness, contemplating goodbyes
 I flee with the swift complicity of the railway...

Among the passengers hastened by images
 I am a thread in the chain of circumstances
 with a flavor of Colombian or Israeli danger
 voices that modulate in a sea of uncertainties
 from faces that dissolve in the haze...

Love returns with the precision of a switchman
 the sun dances its rays over the rails
 the vast universe passes through my entire being
 I look for the station, my destination, in imaginary confines
 in the passengers that board and disembark
 in anonymous hotels, in street concerts...

Again the sultry, tropical heat awakes me
 the vallenatos of the era, *la casa en el aire*
 a country side that remains untouched by the eyes
 under a clear sky that bites through the daily routine
 the celebration of life in flowers
 happy is the sea in the tempest of my laughter
 I advance in this polyphony on the rails
 occupied by dualistic dreams.

Station after station an occasional love
 brilliant scenery, another erotic interlude
 another point of departure without a definitive platform of arrival
 your tree of desires peddles across my bridges

the train is amused by the insanity of my caverns
 the rasping breath of contentment overwhelms us
 solitude and the icy waters are left behind
 we are bridge-train-tunnel content
 on the railway fragrant of sweat and perfume
 flooded by the languages of the land

half-way through the journey I am reborn
 I am an explosion crater, volcano and lava
 tattooed by nostalgia, by footprints
 by hermits, by hallucinating lovers
 by places I never witnessed, cities through which I passed sleeping
 my urgent thirst for coconut milk, for the fruits of your kind.

I am awoken by an explosion of trills and feathers
 women in their daily struggle
 boys in their school uniforms
 sugar cane stalks, coffee trees...
 and you remain lost in the station, your jeans and your backpack
 pierced with my same uncertainty
 and the door is shut under a vicious sun in the morning parade.

II

It is always summer on the railway by the tropical coast
 we wait for the train in the raging two o'clock heat of the afternoon
 Santa Marta asleep, Valledupar in siesta
 we abandon the ephemeral euphoria of porros and cumbias
 teenagers get started on the outskirts of town (bestiality)
 the train is announced under an osseous sky of cables
 of giant raindrops that pour down over the motorcycles of the time
 and a solitary kiosk displays the jaws of a vanquished shark.

Without moving, we escape the heart of the countryside
 in the living room, the padlocked chest secures unknown stories
 the famer rests at the end of his journey
 trees march by in the tranquility of the afternoon
 the humdrum of the train makes us sleepy (chuga chuga, puff puff)
 you breathlessly penetrate my joyous countryside
 they wave red handkerchiefs
 you bore through my tunnels and you melt in the eternal wound

you descend intoxicated by the abyss
passengers board overwhelmed by the absences
you carry out your destination like the turning of pages in a great novel
and you clear the ground of the fallen leaves
we while away in the fire of summer
we are intoxicated by the prospect of a distant canteen
of drunken couples who dare defy death.

The smooth wind brings the caress of a mother giving her goodbyes
a bright gleam throws light upon the window
a silhouette that we leave in the door
the sun's scar on the pond

ah! my railway sets course for my cardinal points
transitory platforms of life
my mirrors are clouded by the pain of departure
travelers fill the train
and another rhythm vibrates in my blood.

A new love, another station
I obsess over your skin, feeling your tenderness
traveling the boundaries of your curves
learning to live against the current.

The doors open; we have come to a stop
offers of sugar cane juice, wafers and coconut milk
the sliding of the violin's rails interprets ignored scenery
the animals in the stable are rising early

the women at their daily routines, the men headed for the countryside
and in my backpack of farewells, the scent of agony

the angel holds a flashing light
and the men I love are hoisted like statues
in the memory of my interlude on the rails.

III

The ticket office overflows with travelers and beggars
 from Lima to Huancayo on the Oroya railway
 the avaricious cold of the Andes
 we pursue the track by the rivers
 never have there been so many bridges in one journey, such panic upon crossing the
 Infiernillo
 such darkness in the tunnels and zigzags escorted by death

on the Miggs rails where the llamas used to walk
 the luxurious station of Galera and finally Huancayo
 the astonishment upon seeing the Nazca Lines
 the white city, is Arequipa
 and again the train at Puno Milenario of chuyos and ponchos
 the splendid view from Kuntur Wasi
 the condor that never again will be able to fly

in totora horses we row through the waters of Lake Titicaca
 at Kumbha Mela we go resigned with frugal luggage
 to the Sacred Valley of the Incas, to the Urubamba River, Cuzco, Pisac, Machu Picchu
 we drink coca tea for the altitude sickness
 of an intact culture in overwhelming silence
 like the smoke from a chimney, the night arrives to the rendezvous

intimate spaces, is it art? or is it history?
 station after station different thoughts
 different dispositions, different customs
 an album of mysteries hastens us
 of villages tacked together from eyes wet with tears
 sleeping car, restaurant, deferential waiters

llama and alpaca farms
 storehouses for wool, potato crops
 indigenous road-side inns over the rocks that tell stories of the Andean highlands
 from the pack of hounds in the panic-stricken night
 a multi-colored silence leaves us perplexed
 the evergreen tree from your imagination
 that in view of the acid rain has resisted and kept quiet...

The Oroya railway leaves footprints in my escape
 an avalanche of doubts drowns us
 we will become stars, black holes
 or shining snow under a moonlit night...

the train evokes a song that tells of its urgency
 a derailed lament of distant beings
 that in the darkness fulfills their last desire
 and there isn't time to figure out who they are...

I am intoxicated in the distance savoring secret nostalgias
 the fierce worm lingers in the shadows of the tunnel
 we anticipate the station to share some wine
 a definitive encounter, a halt in the humdrum of life
 we go around and round over the earthly skin
 you devour the flower petals, I drink the water from its irises
 and we declare ourselves disciples of vertigo.

Another station over the rails of my life
 I board the Rajdhani Express from Bombay to New Delhi
 I exchange dollars for rupees, my body fails to contain my emotions
 the central station swarms like a human anthill
 it sleeps, sits on the floor, wanders about in an aura of savory aromas
 a rumor in unfamiliar languages on the train cars

the train is a body populated by other bodies
 with a past that insists on revisiting us
 and a chimera always compelling us to depart
 the moss grows, we lose ourselves in the hook's tangle
 in Basle, Paris, Madrid, Macondo

I live my own arduous track
 I carry legible scars on the broken rails
 in the fissures that the snow leaves for me

I fall asleep lulled by the pasture
 I travel through thousands of silences
 boring through hundreds of obscurities
 I chew on piper betel leaves
 and I arrive in the cosmic city of Rishikesh.

The waters of the Ganges cure my old wounds
lovers surrender to a clandestine love at midnight
they come and go through the cars talking of haphazard chance
the mothers silence their babies
the men reflect on their deferred love affairs
friends' childhood games
people that stay...that go
the pain of all that was left behind...

the moon is drawn in crystals, I am unaware of the time
men's grudges, women's sorrows
entire fables march through their minds
the train advances and the night escapes from its wheels
some travel looking behind, others ahead
and I go from south to north on my railway tracks
I bury my DREAM in mysterious signs
I feel train, conductor, and track
destination, station, tunnel and bridge...

and if you want, I'll invite you to board me.