*The Light of Desire: La Luz de Deseo*. Marjorie Agosin. Translated by Lorie Marie Carlson (Chicago: Swan Isle Press, 2010. 85 pages, $28.00). ISBN 978-09748881701

In *The Light of Desire: La Luz del Deseo,* Marjorie Agosin explores the territory of love, which she makes as tangible as the sights and sounds of the country of Israel, the setting of this book-length poem. Agosin, whose family migrated from Chile to the United States when she was twelve, often addresses the experience of the immigrant. In *The Light of Desire,* a narrator, relocated to the Middle East where her lover had grown up, conveys the experience of a Jewish stranger in the Jewish homeland.

*The Light of Desire* consists of a single free verse poem broken into six sections. The poem remains more lyric than narrative, each section weaving together part of a complex shared history between the two lovers. Lori Marie Carlson’s excellent translation maintains much of the feeling of the original poem by using rhyme, alliteration, and assonance parallel to the original text.

The poem starts with the first meeting between the lovers many years before. “I found Israel / in your eyes” (I. 12-13) writes Agosin. For the narrator, Israel expresses itself less as a geographic location than as the map of her lover’s body. As a result, Agosin suffuses the poem with imagery of human bodies that, like water, flow in and through each other. A shared memory of childhood and young love dominates early parts of the poem. For the narrator, her lover and Israel intertwine and envelop each other, but she continually returns to the sensuousness of the lover rather than to the experience of Israel as a place.

By the third section, the poem has started to take on mythic qualities. The two bodies woven together create “the mantle that covers the dreams of the Almighty” (III. 96). For every abstraction, Agosin offers a dozen sensuous nouns. The sleeping God depends as much on the physical bodies of the lovers as they depend on him:

As the poem continues, Agosin explores the meaning of voice in relation to God, history, and the bodies of the lovers. In Jewish mythology, God spoke the world into existence. Here, it seems that the narrator’s world, too, began with the word.

Your naked voice

In my naked voice

Voice that calms

Voice that falls in the cracks of desire

And it is your voice in love

Surprising moan that boils

That flowers

That is the history of our desire (IV. 8-15)

The repetition of the word “voice,” the assonance (calms/falls, voice/boils), and the rhythm give the stanza the weight of ritual. Shortly thereafter, the narrator describes the sexual pleasure in long Whitmanesque lines that convey a sense of ecstasy. His voice, she says, fills her “In the yes of the pleasure in the pleasure that is also that voice of subterranean earth always / Sunken, bound to sex, to the delirium of sex, to the joy of sex and all its deliriums / all of its upsets” (IV. 23-26).

In the final sections, the narrator moves from the “small things” that she loves – Jerusalem at night, Israel, April, her lover’s name—to the Wailing Wall (IV. 1-23) as the locus of the narrator’s faith that both divides her history from that of her lover and returns them to each other in the present. The concreteness of the Wailing Wall experience, where “Faith hits me like a copper-colored butterfly / among the stones” (VI. 206-8) leads to the realization that “Neither love nor desire are chosen / Only / Faith and the moment” (VI. 214-16). Finally, the refrain becomes “Stay forever within me” (VI. 272) as the fifty year-old narrator reconciles the silences and absences of the past with the unity the two lovers now feel.

The narrator in *The Light of Desire* is a woman in love, not only with a man, but with a shared history and a place. Like Pablo Neruda, about whom Agosin wrote a book, Agosin embodies the commonplace abstraction of “love” with images, sound, and smells to create a paean to a very specific life, which evokes a sense of the eternal, of God and time entwined with a quotidian existence.

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