

"Under Permanent Crossfire": Poetry and Revolution

Jen Hofer

**THE VIOLENT FOAM:
 NEW AND SELECTED POEMS**

Daisy Zamora
 Translated by George Evans

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The first time I traveled to Mexico as an adult, I took the train from Oakland to El Paso, then a special bus-station-to-bus-station Greyhound into Ciudad Juárez, and finally a local bus south through nopal and saguaro fields into the center of Mexico, to Guanajuato. After crossing the border into Ciudad Juárez, I had a few late-night hours to kill before my bus left the station. At that point, my knowledge of border cities was quite limited, and my belief was that such towns boast the worst of both worlds; I opted to stay in the bus station, reading and writing until departure time. As the janitor mopped under my feet, we engaged in fairly typical foreign-girl chitchat. When he asked me what I do, I replied "*soy poeta*": "I'm a poet," a statement that in the US more often than not elicits a half-nasal, half-guttural, "A what?," or just a slightly patronizing blank stare. This fellow, however, not only seemed to know what a poet is (and is for), but immediately began to recite his rather lengthy favorite poem from memory.

Thus, with that recitation—of a poem by a poet whose writing I don't particularly like, but recited in a way that delighted me utterly—began my first encounter with a culture where poetry means something to people other than poets themselves (and their mothers, if they're lucky), where poetry is not alien to the culture but rather is part of the way the culture makes itself. Where, as George Evans says of Nicaragua in his introduction to Daisy Zamora's most recent book, *The Violent Foam: New and Selected Poems*, poets and writers "live in a world and milieu... where everyone seems interested in poetry, tries to write it, recites it, and where the people not only read their poets, but quote them, respect them, and send them out into the world as trusted ambassadors and representatives."

I do not mean—nor, I'm certain, does Evans—to imply that Mexican culture or Nicaraguan culture or any other Latin American culture is not stratified along lines of class, language, education, gender, race, and region, resulting in a se-

vere crisis of literacy and access not only to basic necessities like books and other learning tools but to other basic necessities like food, water, electricity, housing, and medical care. In fact, many poems in *The Violent Foam* speak specifically to these issues on an individual, deeply human level, to, for example, the hypocrisy of national leaders who "speak out in defense of the poor,/ of children, women,/ of justice," yet dump all their "fury.../ and... impotence because [they] don't have a custom-made world,/ ... on the weak/ who appear in the statistics." It is therefore, perhaps, more noteworthy still that poetry enjoys such wide and dedicated readership (both textual and oral) precisely in countries with some of the lowest literacy rates in the world, not to mention high rates of poverty, hunger, homelessness, disease, and undereducation.

In the contemporary landscape, it is difficult, if not downright impossible, for most US readers or writers to imagine writing in the context of a culture where many, many people—in some cases perhaps even a majority of the population, including people who put their daughters through college on a bus station janitor's salary, as my acquaintance had—are not only familiar with poetry, but think of it as a tool for the expression of what they experience, what they feel, what they think, what and how they see. *The Violent Foam*, an ample bilingual edition translated by George Evans with significant input from Daisy Zamora herself (Evans and Zamora, not incidentally, are married), is a tremendously illuminating example of writing that comes out of, and writes into, such a context:

From each one life draws a face.

I'm not talking about cheekbones,
 perfect noses, eyebrows, eyes,
 wrinkled foreheads
 sagging cheeks or
 eyelids

but of what is impossible to hide
 or fix with surgery or make-up.

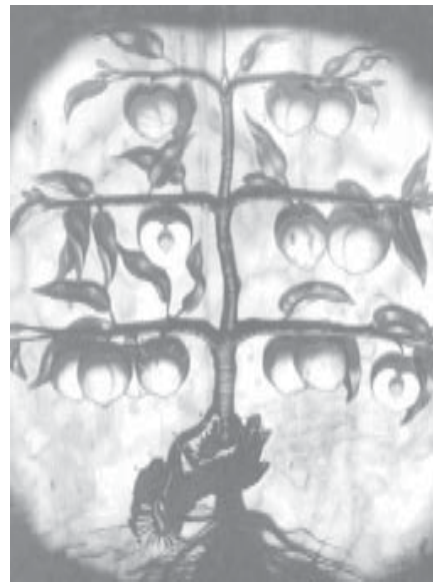
I'm talking about the misery and horror
 meanness and joy,
 the cruelty or compassion

we see, without warning,
 on someone else's face
 surprisingly our own.

("From Each One Life")

Zamora's work is written in terse, clear, quotidian, syntactically and imagistically straightforward Nicaraguan Spanish. The translations she and Evans have created—though they do not always reflect the simple elegance Zamora achieves in Spanish—tend to effectively mirror such straightforwardness in English. In both languages, these poems are nothing if not accessible. They are about things, about people, about emotions and ideas,

about everyday human experience. They are easy to read, easy to understand: their complexity lies not on the surface, but under it, in the social and political considerations they raise and the ways they raise them. These writings pay tribute to many of the unsung voices—especially women's voices—of contemporary Nicaraguan society, and *The Violent Foam* reads as if written with precisely those voices in mind. In its concreteness, its clarity, its simple statement of simple fact, and its reliance on basic description,



Detail from cover

this volume seems designed so that a wide range of readers from all different walks of life might be able to enjoy the book, to recognize themselves in its pages:

All my life bent over a SINGER 15-30,
 and at night dreaming of backstitches,
 tucks, basting,
 sleeves, ruffles, pleats.
 Didn't even have time for men,
 always worn out and with back pain.

Once such a happy girl,
 oldest daughter, favorite of my father.
 After your dad ruined me
 my youth was gone,
 there was only work and more work.

Hofer continued on page 8

I gave you life, son,
but I've had no life,
and don't even know how it might have
been
to be myself.

("Seamstress")

In his introduction, George Evans cautions against an oversimplified "personal" reading of Zamora's work, a particular danger in poems like these, which seem almost uniformly to speak from personal experience, from the emotionally and politically charged perspective of an "I" driven to express her experience of the world in broad poetic images. Evans cites scholar Greg Dawes, who notes that Zamora's book *En limpio se escribe la vida* (Life Written on a Clean Slate), published in Nicaragua in 1988, was "the first poetic and feminist manifesto that undermines patriarchal definitions of the family, reproduction, housework, and the 'double day.'" At a time when politically minded activists, artists, and scholars in US cities were unsettling not just gender roles but the very notions of gender itself, anti-machista women and men in Nicaragua and all over Latin America were struggling to revolutionize societies where women's voices were practically unheard and women's work was undervalued, if it was noticed at all. In such a context, to write outspokenly, politically, consciously *as a woman*, reads as a radical or even revolutionary literary act:

I love my back sprayed with muted bright
stars,
my translucent hills, wellsprings of the

breast
that provide primary sustenance to the
species.
Cliff-like rib cage, waist in motion,
my womb a warm, overflowing vessel.

I love the moon-like curve of my hips
shaped by successive births,
the sharp curving wave of my ass;
and my legs and feet, foundation and
support for the temple.
(from "Celebration of the Body")

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For readers versed in the wildly varied complexities and taut, tangled intricacies of contemporary US poetic discourses, such lines sound almost quaint, as if their author longed for a simpler time when one could make unproblematic reference to one's body, could celebrate the female form as a "temple," worthy both of respect and of a kind of reverence that today might feel almost as confining as the famous patriarchal pedestals upon which women were so lovingly and so limitingly placed in the past. Yet perhaps readers versed only in such discourses do not have the contextual literacy toward which Zamora writes. Such pedestals, perhaps boasting slightly different inscriptions, still form part of the foundation of many

contemporary Latin American societies. Different revolutions require different actions, different languages. These poems were written after the Sandinista Revolution, in which Zamora was an active participant. The consciousness she presents in *The Violent Foam* has clearly been influenced by her ongoing political development and her double commitment to her people and her ideals. For Nicaragua, and for Zamora, the revolution is not over. Perhaps it is her sense that she is "under permanent crossfire" that leads Zamora to develop a poetics where the exigencies and urgencies of wartime require a certain kind of "clarity" to bring readers "back to life":

We are a minefield of clarity,
and whoever crosses the barbed wire comes
back to life.
But who's interested in crawling through
undergrowth?
Who dares sail a tempest?
Who wants to come face to face with
purity?

That's why we're fenced off in this
no-man's-land,
under permanent crossfire.
(“No-Man's-Land”)

Jen Hofer is the editor and translator of No Visible Doors: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry by Mexican Women, which will be published by University of Pittsburgh Press in 2003. Her first book of poems, slide rule, was published by subpress in October.