



Jack Foley

Review: *Life in Suspension / La Vie Suspendue* by
Hélène Cardona

(Salmon Poetry, Cliffs of Moher, County Clare, Ireland), 2016

I am the wind which breathes upon the sea,
I am the wave of the ocean,
I am the murmur of the billows,
I am the bull of seven battles,
I am the vulture upon the rocks,
I am a tear shed by the sun....

—A Song of Amergin (Old Irish)

Je est un autre.

— Jean Nicolas Arthur Rimbaud

One of the most remarkable things about this remarkable book is its utter *strangeness*. It arrives with admiring blurbs from a bevy of prominent poets both young and old—poets who could scarcely be called members of the same school: John Ashbery, Billy Collins, Richard Wilbur, Dorianne Laux, Lee Upton, Ilya Kaminsky, Donald Revell, Grace Cavalieri, Stephen Yenser. Yet *Life in Suspension / La Vie Suspendue* sounds like none of those people.

Hélène Cardona is an actress as well as a poet—the book has blurbs from Lawrence Kasdan, Costa-Gavras, and Olympia Dukakis—so one might expect the poetry to be the projection of multiple personalities, one of the functions of a skillful actress. In fact, however, virtually every poem in the book is I-based:

Woodwork

If I could gather all the sadness of the world,
all the sadness inside me
into a gourd,
I'd shake it once in a while
and let it sing,
let it remind me of who I used to be,
bless it for what it taught me
and stare at it lovingly
for not seeping out of its container.

Though not one of Ms. Cardona's more typical pieces, "Woodwork" has charm and grace; it asserts that the poet's past was one of "sadness," yet even "sadness" may sing and teach. Indeed, sadness may yet return: the poet is safe—and perhaps self-contained—as long as Pandora's Box remains closed. At some level, the poem is insisting on the existence (and necessity) of boundaries: "stare at it lovingly / for not seeping out of its container."

Across the page from "Woodwork," however, we find "Travail d'orfèvre":

Si je pouvais rassembler toute la tristesse du monde,
toute la tristesse enfouie en mon sein
à l'intérieur d'une gourde,
je la secouerais de temps en temps
pour qu'elle chante
et me rappelle qui j'étais.
Je la bénieais pour ce qu'elle m'a appris
et la regarderais avec amour
pour qu'elle ne s'échappe pas de son recipient.

At the opening of the book, Cardona writes, "This book was first written in English and then translated into French by the author so that it could be presented in a bilingual edition." One assumes that the French version that appears alongside each poem is simply a translation that says more or less exactly what the original is saying. Yet as one reads the book through—reading *both* the French and the English—one realizes that that is not quite the case.

An *orfèvre* is not a worker in wood; an *orfèvre* is a gold smith or a silver smith (“*Personne qui fabrique des objets d’or ou d’argent*”). Nor is this divergence the case with this poem alone: such differences are a feature of many of the poems that appear on the left-hand side of the book.

The fact is that the French poems are not so much “translations” as they are *re-creations* of the English—parallel but not identical poems in a different language, a language in which, to be sure, the author is fluent.

What happens to an I-based poem when “I” becomes “Je”? What is the relationship between “I used to be” and “j’étais”? Many people have had the experience of “being a different person in a different language”; whether or not that is so for Cardona, it is so for the readers of this book—a book in which the author makes statements like this:

I’m four years old, in Monte Carlo.
My mother takes me to school.
A pigeon poops on my scarf.
She reassures, *it brings good luck.*

but also makes statements like this:

I am born with the Black Lilith Moon,
Messenger and Warrior side by side...
I inhabit unknown worlds.

...

I hear beyond the range of sound
the ineffable, the sublime....

...

I walk on all fours,
elongated, neither human nor animal,
a creature you only see in magic.

Throughout the book, comforting “I-based” Autobiography is constantly transforming itself into rather disturbing Myth as languages mirror and collide with each other. Cardona dedicates the book to “John, my constant companion”: “Some search their whole lives for that elusive other / who is simply the perfect mirror.” The book is full of “elusive others,” personae who greatly

expand (mythologize) the individual woman, the woman with a mother and a grandfather, a woman who represents “shape-shifter” as “chaman” (shaman) and who asks “Suis-je un fantôme?”—am I a ghost?

My life is a slide show
 projecting the same image
 again and again,
a glimpse into a world full of light
 from behind bars,
 a world that escapes North and South
as I stare at the Angel,
 transfixed,
 blinded by whiteness of time.

Life in Suspension / La Vie Suspendue is not a book of Personae (“characters”)—something one might expect from an actress (“I dream for a living”)—but ultimately a rather stunning attempt to escape Persona altogether, an attempt to become “a creature you only see in magic.” Again and again Cardona fantasizes herself as something larger, powerful, mythic—something in touch with “God”:

Art is perpetual rebirth, the way
 we choose to express ourselves,
 the way we receive counsel from God.

In Jerome Rothenberg’s wonderful new edition of his classic *Technicians of the Sacred*, one can find this passage from the Troubriands, Papua New Guinea:

The mind, *nanola*, by which term intelligence, power of discrimination, capacity for learning magical formulae, and all forms of non-manual skill are described, as well as moral qualities, resides somewhere in the larynx...The force of magic, crystallized in the magical formulae, is carried by men of the present generation in their bodies...The force of magic does not reside in the things; it resides within man and can escape only through his voice.

For Cardona too, language is the instrument of *magic*, of transformation. And for her too magic resides “somewhere in the larynx.” Her work skips over Modernism and arrives at a kind of lyrical Archaism—the sort of thing Rothenberg meant when he wrote, “Primitive Means Complex.” As in the Modernists—as in John Ashbery, who blurbs the book—language is important and

manifests in different “tongues,” at times arriving at odd British usages (“quieten”) or even solecism: “I took the sword, lay it on the bed” (should be “laid”). Yet language is only the instrument of a primary drive towards spirit:

Fall asleep at the lake
tonight, no boundaries, like a fairy.
I am the eagle song, a calling, light
defying gravity, someone to steal
horses with, a case of mistaken identity,
tears transforming into fish in the air,
a force that propels forward, proclaims
who I am with a passport from God,
Her will an explosion, with bullets
for words. I offer you everything....

Not the confessional “I,” not the “I” of personal expression, not even, finally, the mythic “I,” but an explosive secular mysticism is what this book is after. At times it leaves us—deliberately—almost breathless, no longer quite “alive” but not dead either: *la vie suspendue*.

Jack Foley has published books of poetry, criticism, stories and sketches, and a two-volume “chronoencyclopedia,” Visions & Affiliations: California Poetry 1940–2005. He became well-known through his “multivoiced” performances with his late wife, Adelle. Foley’s most recent books are The Tiger & Other Tales, a book of stories, sketches and two plays; Riverrun, a book of poetry; and Grief Songs.