

Sandra Guerreiro, *Onde o Lugar / The Where Place*. Translated from the Portuguese by Anna Reckin. Lisbon: Glaciar, 2019.

Published as a bilingual enface edition, this terse set of unnumbered poems (or a single poem) is divided into three sections, “of time,” “of sound,” and “of memory”. Each section is comprised of six poems (or pages); the shortest page holds three lines, and the longest eighteen. In this framing structure, each poem provides a limited number of images placed into prepositional relation to circumstances; each set of images, or, better, each perspective on the limits of the human condition, undergoes movement or takes action. While the poems spark numberless associations and narrative possibilities, I feel that they realize their energy in the evocation of simple (yet grand and stark) nouns that are transformed by their affective complications with space, expression, and impression. In saying this I do nothing more than translate the section titles, i.e.: over time things change, sound calls us to attention, and memory is the power of selection among experiences.

To provide an example of this, consider the last poem of the first half of the book (pages 30-31), falling midway in the section “of sound.” The first line is: “under the pressure of rumor”. This line easily connects to the poem on the previous page, the last line of which, “the astonished sun at the corner of noise,” could offer the subject of this “pressure of rumor” since there is no punctuation used in the poems (with rare exceptions). We experience plenty of noise, and we feel the pressure of rumor, so that from any embodied perspective, even the sun seems to feel it. But the second line largely prevents this enjambment by offering a more human subject, a “we”:

we resort to the subtle guile  
of moods constrained  
by leaking water

and amphorae made of steel

forged  
forever

When I type the Portuguese into Google Translate, it provides lines 2-7 as “we are absorbed in the light morning / of the compressed mood / of the spilled water / and writhings of / wrought / ~iron~ / always” (the tildas indicate “iron” is part of line 5 in the original). My nearly complete ignorance of Portuguese permits some credibility to this reading, but the most interesting aspect of my typing the lines bit by bit into the machine was that Guerreiro’s *enfusas* was alternately given by Google as “spills” or “writhings”, not the wonderful word “amphorae” provided in the translation.

[A few days after a heavy windstorm that took down many trees in my neighborhood, and the trees brought down power lines, so that my street was blocked for some time, I walked by a the wreckage of one of the older trees on my block. There was a perfectly solid amphora (more a vase than a shipping container) lying in a gaping stump wound on the road verge, an object of recent manufacture, with a bright white base and Mediterranean blue for its Vitruvian wave and heroic figures. Like my desire to find a “light morning” and “writhing iron” in this poem, I felt an urge to take the amphora home. But I resisted the urge, and instead cradled the incongruity of the situation and scene as a prelude to memory.]

Reckin's rendering captures more of the bracing force of constraint that surrounds our dealings with rumor today. Its power, in real life as in the poem, is something on the order of Shakespeare's prologue to *Henry IV part II*. Rumors of good news may give us a false hope, or we are too sunk in worry to enjoy them; rumors of bad news may make us weep, but perhaps only for a chimera. We may find ourselves "leaking" or sealed up and "forged / forever" when presented with a significant rumor, but like many characters in the world of *Henry IV part II*, we may simply grow too weary with the burdens of the age to care whether sounds (as this poem is in the "of sound" section) ring true or hollow. All readings of the poem—Portuguese, English and Googlish—insist on location as consequential. Here is a constrained mood (*humor comprimido*) resolved into the heroic nouns of its concluding lines: *arco a braço // uma força de âncora* ("the stretch from arch to arm // strong as an anchor", lines 10-11). Is this solace? Or irony? I imagine a setting for the poem: the hold of a wooden ship, chained captives, turned into commodities, a leak in the hull. I think of Julius Scott's history of the Caribbean during the Age of Revolutions, *The Common Wind*.

Here in the very middle of the book is an "anchor", so why not work one's way from this "same / point" (the last words of the book, on pages 50-51) outwards? Doing so leads me not to the fields where the "[earth] takes shape" as Linda Russo suggests in her postface reflections, but on an oceanic voyage, an Atlantic crossing, even. To be fair, Russo is right to speak of "the body living through intimate ceremonies" as thematic of *The Where Place*. To miss the centrality of this bodily experience, its primacy, is to not have read or heard the poems at all. But in my desire to know "where" the body takes "place", I find myself crossing, landing, seafaring, and enduring the strictures, oppressions, and rigors of a ship's ways of applying law, making war, conducting commerce. Such "open dominance" (pgs.12-13), along with the many tropes of colonial conquest that occur in the text, chime evenly with the cuts, wounds, exile, and blood that are as co-present as the "roses made of sea-air" (46-47) and the sexual-maternal "firm embrace" of the cervix as a "harbour" (36-37).

In my experience with this book, placing myself wholly in the sound of the Portuguese in Guerreiro's reading (<https://soundcloud.com/anothertrickster/leitura-integral-onde-o-lugar-sandra-guerreiro-mp3>), and in my delight in considering the work of translation, I fear I may be overanxious to foreground one set of images and put many other qualities of the work out of earshot. In writing about it I fall into assignments of meaning and structure, assertions full of flawed weavings and transverse cuts. Reading for a central, controlling image produces artifacts of objectivism and objectification. Guerreiro's poems succeed in breaking from the abuse that critical strictures about structure are likely to inflict. One should avoid becoming inhabitant of the "ex.plained plane", as one is likely to end up with the book's exquisite "rhythms" merely "fixed to the boards" (44, 46). Here is a poet of time, sound, and memory. I am a reader anxious for time to become sun and moons, for sound to be the breaking of metal, and for memory to reclaim the hearts of all those exiled onto wooden ships. These poems are as much or more concerned about human blood, the throat under duress, and the body as feminine consciousness; about desire, passion, and suffering. Casting about to secure my own meanings does little to gauge or convey my appreciation for the accomplishment of the *composition*, and I mean that in its fullest sense, of *Onde o Lugar / The Where Place*.