BREATHING IN PORTUGUESE, LIVING IN ENGLISH

Also by Heather Tosteson

Germs of Truth

The Sanctity of the Moment: Poems from Four Decades

God Speaks My Language, Can You?

Hearts as Big as Fists & Other Stories

Visible Signs

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Wising Up Press Collective
Wising Up Press
Decatur, Georgia

Wising Up Press
P.O. Box 2122
Decatur, GA 30031-2122
www.universaltable.org

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Catalogue-in-Publication data is on file with the Library of Congress.
LCCN: 2013957506

Wising Up ISBN: 978-0-9826933-1-5

DEDICATION

A minha raposa manhosa,
I miss you . . .

Breathing in Portuguese, Living in English

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O começo
The Beginning

Eu começo—I begin
with a combination, *uma combinação*
das línguas, languages, such a shush
and churr of consonants and brown
skin and dreams of computer screens,
empty schema. *Praia da Joaquina,* Joaquina Beach,
Lagoa da Conceição, Lake of Conception,
and another lake of concepts, *lagoa de concepções*
cheia de queixas de casais, full, too full,
of those fractious quibbles unique to any couple,
everywhere you turn, rippling, glinting . . .
I just don't know,
hoje, ontem ou amanhã,
today, yesterday or whatever follows,
how to live *uma vida,*
this one, mine, with its limited
mileage, *quilometragem limitada,*
imprescindível, so unpredictable,
ardente, vulnerável,
and pure.

A CONCATENAÇÃO

CONCATENATION

Trocar em miúdos
To Put It Simply

Ainda não, ainda bem, ainda por cima.
Not yet, just as well, and on top of that,
espichada on the beach, stretched out half asleep,
I woke into an understanding, *uma apercepção*
conhecida, espantosa, e sossegada,
familiar, astounding, and quiet, so very quiet.
Woke to something so *entranhado,*
bone deep, that to know it is to know myself
as just this: a distant island; an horizon
that underscores the difference
between these two equally true
blues; and an easy sweep
of green, mountainous coast
cradling the undrinkable.

The only response is to dance
the mute body, *o corpo*
mudo, e ainda por cima,
on top of that, to sing
the bewildered heart, *o coração*
tão aturdido,
and enter through this
uma síntese sensual, não-ficcional,
a true, sensuous synthesis,
in both languages.

Rápido
Hurry Up

Hurry up in Spanish is *rápido!*
And here in Florionópolis it's happy do!
Rápido! Rápido! It's catching
and we take to chanting it with its hints
of a tune from South Pacific as our heels
slur up and down the dunes of the south Atlantic.
Rápido! Rápido! Happy view. Happy few.
Another *aula,* class, and our mantra modulates
to *rapidinho*. And our names for ourselves
in this, our *terceira idade*, old age, third stage,
soften too: *meu velhinho, minha velhinha,*
we murmur, *como está?* How *are* you
on this dusky, wind-thrumming afternoon in *Brasil?*
On the crest of the next dune, breathless
we pause, alight with *dúvidas*, doubts, but
aloft, like Daedalus, on something thicker, richer.
Do we use *tudo* or *todo*, we wonder,
no one to answer to but each other.
We shrug then, taking in the sureness
of our descent, the lift of this instant,
and just sing out *bem*
like a benediction.

AS VERDADES

HOME TRUTHS

O destino
The Destination

Transitions are not *a minha força,* my strength,
um fato um pouco louco, a kind of crazy fact
for someone who has made so many—
and has, *ainda, ainda, ainda,*
the largest one yet ahead.
Our trouble is, whatever our intentions,
we travel heavy. We carry so little of value—
clothes, blank paper, needle-nose pliers,
dried ferns, herbs, flash disks, earrings, poems
in progress—and still our bags flaunt red
warning labels. Shamed, helpless, we haul them
through the world at large, straining backs, tearing tendons,
our own, our intimates, and those of total strangers.
Decepcionado is what they use here for
disappointed. *Decepcionado comigo mesmo,* myself.
For the trouble is we travel heavy knowing full well
that sooner than justice, later than mercy,
the wind will toss us—a shower of ash
only slightly denser than mist, a lover's cry—
back into our children's eyes.

RECOMPOR

TO RESET

Resplandecente
Resplendent

Ruim. Vile, wicked, useless, rotten, faulty,
poor. *Ruins.* The plural. *O pensamento ruim.*
Bad thought. *Os pensamentos ruins.*
Just more of the same. Drop it!
Deixar pra lá! Oh don't I wish—just
to do it, just to stop questioning what no longer
needs questioning—*identidade*, purpose, plot—
and just questing. But where? For what?
Despite myself I've grown fond
of the hubbub on the cobbled pedestrian way,
the pulse of the hawkers, the thrum
of dreams I can't find my way into,
they're so intimate and unself-conscious.
Fond too of this quirky skyline, its drab concrete
high-rises, church steeples, corrugated rooftops,
and the oblique angle at which I view
the silvered dome glinting above four baroque clocks,
each boldly facing up to a cardinal direction,
none keeping exactly the same time,
and all differing from mine. *Na verdade,*
fond frees me to leave. *Então,*
amanhá à noite, so tomorrow
night, we *rumamos,*
head out for somewhere new
inside us, *resplandecentamente*
ordinary.

NO MEIO DESTE

IN THE THICK OF THIS

Apoiou

Supported

You crow when you find it, the word
that confirms our deepest suspicions—
that this language truly is on the verge
of dissolving completely into vowels:
It's easy enough to sing, a-p-o-i-o-u,
but just how should we convert it
to the rapid slur of daily speech?
A-pó-joo. So close in sound to *apogeu*,
the crowning point, our apogee,
and still it sounds so oppositional.
Third person. Singular. Past. *Ele* or *ela*
se apoiou. They did. They helped.
For no reason, no reason at all.
It gives me pause. I oppose the thought
for it doesn't include us. City after city,
it never does. I'm so turned off these days
by my surroundings, but the tawdriness
of this city is not so very different
from our own. It's *uma cidade normal*—
with its dog shit and broken glass
and ubiquitous graffiti: *o imperialismo*
é um tigre de papel, imperialism is just,
don't we all know it, a paper tiger.
Here, the small shops are as sparsely stocked
as any country store or ghetto market in Georgia.
And, like there, the shelves, half-bare, still hold
the essentials: *o pão,* bread, *o sabão,* soap, *o queijo,* cheese,
o molho de tomate, tomato sauce, *a água mineral,*
bottled water, and *as velas*, candles
for when the lights go out—
so it's not so different, not so different at all.
This homely insight *me apoiou,* just like this pun.
The ground, today, *me apoiou.* Life itself
more times than I can count *me apoiou.*
And who knows, even here, one day *um homen*
ou uma mulher (still yet to be met),
me apoiaria, and I too may come to the aid
of a total stranger, *o apoiaria,*
for no reason, no reason at all.

Na marra

In Full Strength, Overwhelmingly

My father appears on my computer screen
in real time, frail, eyelids quivering,
a minha raposa manhosa, my sly fox,
close to comatose—and I am
despite myself *invado na marra*,
overcome by all that he is now,
almost dumb, deaf, and blind.

Astonished at myself, I fight
por este homen, this man who chose,
more times than chance can claim,
to betray, deceive, and undermine,
and *faz nas coxas,* make a fucking bollocks
of his private life. And this
is what is left, his sparse hair
flaring in the light, his body
fetal, his cough opening
his soul to eternity.

Perhaps he hears me
assuring him that what he has done
his best to create, evade, desecrate,
a sua sentença eterna, his final judgment,
ends here in these rooms. *The good*,
I whisper, *will outlive you*. It is a curse
and a blessing and the best I can do.

Across the street, a stranger peers
from his balcony, the old concrete
is blackened, faintly European
in its seediness, as real
as my own breath *que abre*
a minha alma, opens my own soul
to the full weight of this sorrow
so bearable, *decisivo*, and
inexplicably simple:
Because you were, we are.

And we are the best of you, a truth
that grips and shapes us all now
just like your lies used to.
Na marra.
Na marra.
Na marra.

HOME

EM CASA

Ficar a mercê das cigarras e da misericórdia

To Be at the Mercy of Cicadas and Compassion

Suddenly we're aware it's here, the song
of the cicadas and are amazed
by how it burrows so immediately
and so straight into the heart
of summer and into our hearts too—
and then expands into voids,
wounds whose existence we've refused
to admit. *Cheio.* Full. *O nosso mundo*
está cheio agora. Our world is full now.
Mas cheio do que? But full of what?
It would be ok with me
if it were just this sound, just this surging
and falling back, this miraculous
bouyance and embrace,
transbordando, overflowing,
but it also, like the sea, *derruba,*
overthrows and ruthlessly debrides
what can't *renovar ou renascer*,
renew or spring up again
even with our help, our hope.
And that hurts. There are stories
in each of us that fester, eat away
at what's most essential in us, *repele,*
repel all our best efforts to heal.
There are words that can't be unsaid, acts
that can't be taken back, denied, or repaired, whole
systems that will never flourish and never
let us loose. That's the god awful, god rueful
truth—and so is this sound that reaches
sem aviso, without warning, into those same depths,
so fresh, raging with something purer and more primal
than joy, and sure, so sure, of its welcome.