

Mercedes Cebrián

Common Market (2006), of which this is the title poem, was my first book of poems. Before that I had published *Affordable Angst*, a new kind of book which interleaved stories and poems, and was chosen by the distinguished critic, Ignacio Echevarria, as one of the essential books published in Spanish since 1950. I thought of myself then as principally a story-teller. Perhaps I still do. For me, writing poetry was like speaking on the radio without having been told how long I was expected to speak. I was improvising in terms of lineation, rhythm and stanza. I didn't know when a poem was finished. I knew I had a good ear, from my musical training, and from my fascinated study of poets like Ashbery, Olds, César Vallejo, and Susana Thénon. But there was also a reality out there I needed to talk about, a reality I only partly understood, and therefore had to explore: *New Spain*: how my country had become, almost overnight, a reasonably wealthy country, a respected member of the E.U. I was also impelled to think and write about my generation, who had only known democracy, but whose parents had lived under Franco's dictatorship. Reading now this long poem that opens *Common Market* translated into English is a real miracle for me, for I still don't believe how Terence Dooley was able to transport – that was the definition of the verb “to translate” in Latin – all the linguistic challenges and the Spanish local flavour present in it into English.

COMMON MARKET

Mercedes Cebrián translated by Terence Dooley

a

Here are the adults
of the European Union
and here too their sleight
of hand in dropping
all the other adults from their lives-
luckily they have
each in their own
wardrobe a mackintosh
navy or taupe.

If I can tuck myself into
this hideaway, no E.U.
directive will reach me there.
Nor any project. In my briefcase
is my own, which I shan't undertake.
I only wish to demonstrate to you
its death, embossed into the pulp
of its handmade paper.

There's an immense recycling-centre
for projects, just down the road.
I would ask you all not to junk
your plastic files, and there's something else
you can do for me: don't leave each other
carelessly behind on airport carpets.
All the unsavoury gossip is in the saccharine-packet
for this decaf. We haven't time for it
either I start running now
or I'll miss forever my connecting flight.

My shoes are no longer honoured, my soles
interest no-one and yet
I feel lucky
all at once a mini-bar slap in the middle of my room
all at once miniature spirits:

at last I'm living the hotel life.

I'm in a meeting and now that I am
pain is irrelevant. The First
Epistle of Saint Paul
to the Corinthians

Love rejoices in the truth, love suffers long

does not apply here: we are finalizing
a deal. It's fragile and may
catch cold. It opens its eyes and can't see us yet.
Once more we are muddling
work with very thin slices
not of bacon, but of speed:
sometimes it happens
that I'm masticating trout
and it's a workaday
trout, and a noble one. Or it happens
that the crème caramel
makes a remark about the export market.
Luckily
there's a mackintosh
navy or taupe
in every wardrobe and I've managed to find
a slightly soiled
suit for the occasion.

In a board-room there's no need
to raise one's voice. Into the microphone
I'd say to you:

Look after your laptops
and water the screens of your rhododendrons

Since, obviously,
very soon the franchises
of this reality
will be opening their doors.

b

Because there was an ocean migration followed.
The means were mail and boats.
The elements, water, ink,
and very thin paper. You had to lick the stamp.
The people in the photographs
ill-favoured. There was the need to eat,
but time left over for the crossings.
One crossing each; you could map
their zigzagging routes.
They left work, they stopped using

verbs of motion, and took up adjectivity
and then, at that moment, their lives
opened up, fast-forwarded, like
flowers in a film; news spread
and took on meaning, as it does today
from electricity and from the air.

Flags were memorized, vowels
lengthened, voices learnt
a new tonality. The floor
was danceable. Meanwhile
we were grateful to
Edison, Marconi, Graham Bell
for their inventions. Cables
and whatever isn't a cable.

Moments still meet
on the map. People and objects
enter stage right
(I recognise a few
by their glimmer),
they share suitcases,
things are, in a way,
unchanged: 'shroud'
still starts with a whisht.
The hand still travels down
the body -
thank goodness the crossing
is less onerous.
Inventions
have much to do with this.

c

We flex our elbow daily
and are not untroubled by
its being a hinge,
its linking arm to forearm.
just as the knee
articulates, facilitates
linkage, though only
in one direction; the link
may fail,
someone is always
left out,
as in a lottery, as if
we spoke round a table
with too few olives on
for the number of guests.

The link isn't forged
 by means of hoarse cries, that would be
 a link for the deaf-mute; rather
 the blood-link is quite silent:
 it offers a lodging-place, my mattress
 and yours too, at no charge.

If you're cold tonight,
 remember to tuck up snugly
 with your own DNA sugars.

That is how genetics work: when war
 breaks out I'll make space in my wardrobe
 for all of you with your inexplicable
 garments. You won't have to fetch
 water from the well. There'll be
 electricity.

My light
 was yours already
 before the advent of rheumatism
 and the invention of rheumatology.
 The joints aren't wasted yet, they creak,
 they're painful, they lock.
 This is how they suffer
 for their linkage.

d

Idealization has come to pass;
 the alien name irradiates
 and now all we possess
 is far smaller than the chance
 of flourishing it in conversation.

My city's name is immutable,
 Madrid in every tongue
 (how different it would be
 if I said Aachen
 and others Aix-la-Chapelle –
 less pertinent, I think, a lesser sense
 of belonging).

Yes I know other passports exist.
 Of course I'm au fait with
 building-methods in earthquake-
 zones. But it's getting late:
 I've asked for a key to the city,
 to the podium
 now it's become a Holy Place,
 where once its name was mud,

and even if that is
 a consolation,

official beauty
 has no merit or ministry. Rather
 let's cling to the tranquillity

of a stork's nest with a stork in it.

Let's hatefully hunt down
 the bell-tower that cast out
 our generation.

The lights are going on in the other
 cities. Here it's a gradual black-out,
 gradual and sudden. The Christmas
 Lights are not to blame: rather
 they augment, furnish, settle accounts.
 On the other hand, our forefathers
 are to blame
 for their cells and for their surnames.
 All we can do is persist
 on the flimsy flow-chart of their silver
 hair. Perhaps if they moved
 closer to the light.

e

Here nothing is founded, at most
 an old light-bulb is swapped for one
 just as lightless, boots are polished,
 uncomplicated ones, black,
 with no laces.
 The umbrella I carry
 has to be a folding one
 not to stray too far from its apex.
 I equidist, I seem to calibrate it,
 to weigh up its diameter,
 and it isn't so: the measurements were fixed
 a long time ago, by other people.
 Feet have stopped growing.
 I won't say any more now
 about feet and umbrellas.

Atoms are coming to be, in your houses;
 the whole of the air
 is domed by your illegible
 signatures. I know that there are people
 daily dependent on
 your dimensions, who live on the warmth
 you leave in your clothes, and this is why I feign

to be working in the constituency
of a diaphanous party. All are windows
from which I observe you, from which
I am thankful for
zip-fasteners (laces
scare me). Now you see why
I only half dance.

Here no-one is being born, we never
understood how so exact a verb
made its way in the world. We knew
no-one has uttered the words
'I am being born'. Please provide us
with a record of a neonate's
first cries. We ask you this
as we see you are skilled
in defibrillation, in mouth-to-mouth
resuscitation, in hopeful projects
like composing cradle-songs.

f

Let's stay in town, at least. The ice
is transitive here.
It turns one to ice.
Ice and hail
of the same substance as rain and snow.

We grow old here, we celebrate
cytologies. We seduce
with gloves on even though
the intense cold
destroys germs.
Sandals are sold
hand over fist
in the shoe-shops, women's
feet fascinate.

Northern cities need
a pitched roof; elsewhere
it's a prayer
for snow that won't fall.
Here, snow
makes access difficult,
confuses
the sky with the street
and with the dwellings,
human laughter
with flyovers, bridges.

All that is not urban
confines us. What occurs
in the neighbourhood of highways
is always pernicious. I refer
to the neighbourhoods of olden days,
when the roads
were deep in mud.

(We are strangers now to mud.
So we can't account for mud.)
We take refuge
indoors: once more
x-rays adorn
our dining-room walls.
Our present reality
is dislocation, the inflamed
ankle, the femur-head.
Something living
filters through it all.

g

Install; redecorate; nail
to the wall, the floor, the false
ceiling.
You chose and ordered the furniture,
you can't complain.
*On these tiles will I raise
my church.*

Consider the arrangement
of bunk beds in the children's room.
Weep for the bed-head
firmly fixed to the wall. Blame
the Persian blinds. How did you feel
once you'd made up your mind?
*Someone has keys
to the portable life.*

Flight is always
a possibility, but don't forget wood
and the antidote to wood, the verbs employed
in the whole process.
The tools will only be
half-visible, much as, or even more
than when we started
*Nothing is more dangerous than
an arrow with no head.*

