

Madeleine Natrass

I Thought I Knew You Emily

(*Bibliotheca - Centro Historico - Mazatlan*)

Upstairs, silent fans shimmy; tiled cool offers oasis after raucous untidy streets. The sign says *Guarde Silencio*. We do—the librarian, me, and two others. In shy Spanish, I ask for the *seccion de poe'sia*. The librarian puzzles, then chuckles: *Ah—si, la poesi'a*, she says. I've mispronounced again. She leads the way through the stacks, stops to finger-read titles, frowns: *Solamente espanol, no ingles senora*, she regrets. Never mind, I'll browse a while.

There is order here, numbered categories, tidy shelves, a small English section, good reads tucked in with dismissibles: Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Proulx's *The Shipping News*, well-read others. The librarian is generously round and friendly, not lean or stern. She approaches with a wide smile and surprises—a yellow-paged, hard-cover Frost. *In ingles*, she beams. And what's this? *Les Imagistes, Madrid 1985*, poems in English paired with their Spanish translations. The text is all Spanish, but I can sort of follow. I discover some unknowns, at least to me. Allen Upward, Richard Aldington. There are some fine samples of familiars: H.D., Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams. And this, an appendix: *The Complete Poetical Works of T.E. Hulme*. It consists of five poems. Two have fine moon metaphors. I copy them into my diary—the ruddy red-faced farmer leaning over a hedge is my favorite. I save this too, from Hulme again:

Old houses were scaffolding once
And workmen whistling.

A fruitful morning. Before I leave, she brings me a Spanish *Emily Dickinson*. It's a bio, interspersed with her poetry quoted in the original. I flip, quick to find the lines, hungry for English. A whole chapter talks about her sense of humor. Funny, I've always thought her a prudish New England spinster. But then I've read somewhere that humor only appears after we first suspect its existence. Again, there's an appendix, a fine selection of her poems face to face with their translations. No time for them today. I tell the librarian I'll be back *manana*. She sets Emily aside, finds a corner for her on the wide wooden desk. *Hasta luego, señora*.

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I'm back today, *miercoles*. She looks pleased to see me, presses Emily into my hands. I spend a quiet hour, the only disturbance the ring of a cell phone at the next table. The librarian sends a scowl, her version of a text message.

I can't come back for four long days. When I do, we only exchange nods. She's busy helping someone. Later, she comes to find me, her expression a question. I explain in halting Spanish that my husband was ill. We chat, she pats me, tells me my *espanol es muy bien*. I settle down with Emily. Today is *sabado*. There is a lesson happening at the next table. Six or seven children are paying quiet attention, learning the basic chess moves. The teacher speaks softly while pointing to his chart. Later he distributes plastic pieces, unfolds paper chessboards, partners the kids up, tutors them patiently. I pretend to read, but I'm not. Really liking just being here, learning. On the way home, I step into the old cathedral; another oasis, another habit.

I've fallen into a satisfying routine here. Library in the mornings, a stop at the church before the bustle of the market. Sometimes I stay for mass—no need to understand the words. It's enough to sit and steep in the palpable faith of the people, such unabashed devotion. I too lit a candle this morning. I've had news that my mother has fallen and broken a hip. I'm a thousand miles away. She'd like that I made that small gesture, like pinning a badge of belief on your lapel. The fabric of *my* faith is worn thin, hardly reversible. If you turn it inside out, it's lined with tattered doubt. Nothing left to do but pray. Emily says it better:

At least to pray is left, is left
Oh Jesus! in the air
I know not which thy chamber is, —
I'm knocking everywhere . . .

Her words hammer home, but ever so gently. I'm learning about her, the kinds of things she read. Imagine having all that solitary time to read—*The Atlantic Monthly*, Emerson, Carlyle, Thoreau, Theodore Parker. And the women—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, the Brontes. She took notes too, copied a quotation from a Sir Thomas Browne: “We are ignorant of the back-parts or lower side of His Divinity.”

Later, she puts her own spin on it:

parts of His far plan
That baffled me the underside

Of His Divinity

That's what we do, isn't it. Gather in words, images, ideas that strike us, then twist them into other shapes according to how we see the world.

Emily spent a lot of time pondering about some kind of God, trying to find a *better friend* than the stern Calvinist one she'd been schooled to believe in. She calls Him *Old Neighbor*. Here, in Mexico, he is *Señor*—not the same connotation as *Lord*; much more approachable, lordly without the upper crustiness. Richard Aldington, one of the *Imagistes*, calls Him other kinds of names in a poem titled “Vates, The Social Reformer”:

Dear unknown God, dear queer-face God
. . . You blanky God . . . blighty God—chicken-pox of Heaven
God you rotten Roman Catholic . . .

Surely he was courting death by lightning. I've tried a few appellations myself, easing into name-calling, cautious because of my own Catholic upbringing: *Indelible inky God*. *Unwrinkable perma-pressed God*. On other days, He's: *Big-hearted hidey God / Never-fibbing, honest-to-goodness God*. Today, he's: *Hard-to-get-to / good-for-nothing-God*.

I'm sick, back in bed, worried about Mom, thinking about hospitals, how cold and cruel and final they can be. Endless nights, sleepless, full-of-pain nights, waiting for the light. Nothing to do but pray. That's when they surface, those rote formulas, those incantations that most of us have stuffed away beneath our faithless façades. All the variations of words that we send up to save ourselves:

Now I lay me down—Lord, let blessed sleep come
Our Father—shall we pay Peter or Paul this month
Deliver her please God—from the aching pain

I'm back home now. Mom is doing well, mobile again, using a walker. I miss the heat of Mexico. Concetta, the librarian told me she won't be retiring before next winter, when I expect I'll return. I've been to the library here to dig up more on Emily, about her self-imposed isolation, her obsessive search to find an acceptable Something. There's a new biography out that suggests she may have been epileptic. Whatever her affliction, if any, she has gifted the world close to eighteen thousand poems and innumerable letters. Her work reflects a thorough schooling in the Bible, the Shorter Catechism, *The New England Primer*; but she questioned those strict static rules and dictums, searched unerringly for a looser, less wrathful God, invented a

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version of Him that suited her. Even then, she ran hot and cold, finding that *Faith slips—and laughs, and rallies*, though she leaned towards belief as she got older. I'm with her there.

Better an *ignis fatuus*
Than no illume at all

What I value most about her is the way she welcomed uncertainty, embraced it as a necessary condition to wonder. The world was a marvelous impossible riddle to be puzzled over. I've discovered something else that endears her to me, rounds out my knowing of her, fleshes her out, if you will. Emily made excellent bread, won prizes for it and served as a judge in baking competitions. I can imagine her elbow-deep in soft pliable dough, sensuously kneading, rather than kneeling. It adds a whole new dimension to her character. She apparently made a mean gingerbread too, and a hefty Black cake that called for loads of cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon and five pounds of raisins. Good cooks tend to be generous.

I make an edible loaf myself. I like the simple pleasure of working those ordinary ingredients, shaping them into nourishing sustenance. That's a bit like what she did with words, too. Emily never stopped her search for that which sustains. She found the sacred in earth's creatures, in the landscape, in life's small happenings. *Muchos gracias*, Concetta, for leading me to Emily. I've discovered an Awesome poet, someone to travel with on sacred searches, verse to ponder when prayer won't come.

Faith—is the Pierless Bridge
Supporting what we see
Unto the Scenes that We do not.

