

Translator's Preface

Suzanne Jill Levine

Isla Negra—literally, Black Island—is where Pablo Neruda used to reside on the Pacific coast of Chile, where his magnificent sprawling wooden shack overlooking a wild stormy ocean is now a national museum and, in a sense, refuge of all the beloved things he left behind on his journey to eternity. In 1991 I visited this sacred site of the bard accompanied by a group of young poets, among them the Bolivian Leonardo García Pabón, who teaches at the University of Oregon in Eugene, and with whom “*nos simpatizamos*” — which is to say that we struck up a friendship. Leonardo wrote a poem to the moments we shared in Isla Negra, sent it to me, and of course I felt the immediate temptation to translate it. Here was a rare occasion for me as *la traductora*: It was about a moment I had witnessed and so I knew the referent first-hand, including the preserved flasks, insects, postcards et al. in the collection and, of course, the famous quotations from some of Neruda’s most celebrated poems. So here you have it, a faithful translation really, a very easy and pleasurable one where I tried to retain some of the Latinate lexicon—e.g. traverse instead of cross—but especially to use a simple and direct register of language that would remind the reader of the palimpsest beneath Leonardo’s words, Neruda “walking around” and his fierce sea beneath “that inaccessible ship.”

ISLA NEGRA

Isla Negra es la sombra inmensa de un barco imaginario
flotando en un mar mecido por un viento con olor a permanente lluvia

Ese barco imaginario enamorado de una peregrina paloma
se reconoce en los fósiles enterrados en el fondo de los océanos
y en los restos del naufragio de un gigante
que se hundió como el Titanic
abrazado al iceberg del lenguaje.

Para atravesar Isla Negra
tienes que llevar ese barco inasible
por el camino que inventa la larga risa
de una traductora del mar enamorada.

En ese mar acechan más peligros
que las infinitas palabras de los versos de Neruda:
proas enloquecidas por el insomnio de verse en fotografías
gorras de capitanes que sucumbieron al encanto de los pulpos,
barcos prisioneros de frascos de farmacias avaros de licores.

En los atardeceres de agosto rondan invisibles sirenas
que cantan en los oídos de los marinos desatentos
y verso a verso los pierden en el mar de los zargazos.

En los días tempestuosos de Isla Negra, el fantasma
del poeta que la sueña
de ese espíritu hecho de genio, buena comida y egomanía
se refleja laberíntico
en las colecciones de barcos, campanas, licores, postales, insectos.

Sí, se refleja solitario.

ISLA NEGRA by Leonardo García Pabón

Translated by Suzanne Jill Levine

Isla Negra is the immense shadow of an imaginary ship
floating on a sea rocked by wind smelling of permanent rain.

An imaginary ship in love with a migrating dove
found in fossils buried at the bottom of the sea
in the remains of the shipwreck of a giant
that sank like the Titanic
embracing the iceberg of language.

To traverse Isla Negra
you have to take with you that inaccessible ship
down the road invented by her long laugh
the laugh of a translator in love with the sea.

In that sea await more dangers
than the infinite words of Neruda's verse:
prows crazed by the insomnia of seeing themselves in photographs
captain caps that gave into the charms of the octopus,
ships imprisoned in pharmacy flasks thirsty for liqueurs.

At dusk in August invisible sirens hover
singing to the ears of sailors caught off guard
and verse by verse they lead them into the Sargasso Sea.

On a stormy day in Isla Negra the ghost
of the poet dreaming
his aura of high spirits, good food and egomania
mirrored in the labyrinthine
collection of ships, liqueurs, postcards, insects.

Yes, mirrored in his solitude.

¡Si pudiera cambiar todo su mar por un verso,
sólo por uno de los versos que escribió
cuando residía en la tierra...!

Si atraviesas Isla Negra sin hundirte por el peso de tus
propias palabras
verás que no hay islas
ni color negro a la intemperie,
en Isla Negra todo es tan imaginario
como las sirenas que su fantasma
no puede escuchar.

Y descubrirás por qué del mar la traductora enamorada está
y cómo su larga risa es el faro en tierra firme
donde las lenguas pueden por fin estar
walking around

If only he could exchange his whole sea for a verse,
for a single verse he wrote
when he resided on earth...!

If you traverse Isla Negra without sinking into the weight of your
words
you will see that there are no islands
nor the color black in the wild wind;
in Isla Negra all is as imaginary
as the sirens his ghost
can no longer hear.

And you will discover why the translator is in love with the sea
and how her long laugh is the beacon of the lighthouse on earth
where many languages can finally be
walking around.