

Astrid Cabral. *Gazing through Water*. Trans. Alexis Levitin. Minneapolis; Oaxaca: Aliform, 2021. 137 pp.

Astrid Cabral is a renowned poet, short-story writer, literary critic, and environmentalist from the State of Amazonas. She was one of the leading names in the Clube da Madrugada (Club of Dawn), a literary movement that in the mid-1950's brought the aesthetic innovations of Brazil's Modernist and Concretist movements to the Amazonian region. This resulted in a formal revitalization of Amazonian literature and a renewed interest in the local culture and environment as literary themes. Cabral's oeuvre is influenced by the reality of her native land, especially the omnipresent Amazon River, its flora and fauna. Her 2008 *Cage*, a bilingual Portuguese/English volume (also translated by Alexis Levitin), first introduced her work to a wider English-language audience. Some of the poems in *Cage* manifest Cabral's concern for the environment, while others give expression to the poet's insightful understanding both of human beings' disconnection from nature and of the animal-like behaviors we struggle to contain in ourselves:

"Cave Canem"

*Within me there are dogs
that howl in times of madness
against cages of courtesy
and collars of good sense.
I set them free in the name of justice
possessed by homicidal bravery.
But knowing that madness kills
unable to control my dogs
I get them vaccinated. They bark but do not bite
and if they do, they do not kill. (Cage 9)*

In *Gazing through Water*, a bilingual compilation from three of Cabral's books of poetry (*Rasos d'água*, 2003; *Ante-sala*, 2007; and *Íntima fuligem*, 2017) the Amazon River remains omnipresent, but the ocean and other waterways are also ubiquitous, as are the

tears suggested in the Portuguese-language title *Rasos d'água* (the expression is “ter/ficar com os olhos rasos d'água”). In the 2021 volume, water is foremost a trope that reflects the metaphysical themes of the poems: the passage of time; personal loss; the dialectics and mysteries of life and death. In “Who?,” for example, the poetic voice asks:

*Who could say
why you crossed the river
when on this bank
there was leafy foliage and shade
and flowers in full splendor?
Hands and branches waved to you
and a song from many throats
lulled your ears.
What daring or what fear
led you to the other side?
...*

*Oh, deaf-mute gods,
who, if not you,
will unveil at last all things to us? (Gazing 35)*

The poems in *Gazing through Water* resonate as more personal than in *Cage*, especially those poems that mourn the untimely death of Cabral’s son, such as “Sonnet” or “Encounter.” In fact, both *Rasos d'água* and the 2021 bilingual edition are dedicated to him: “To my son Giles, presence and tears.” Yet, the pain the lyric subject expresses is universal, as are her deliberations about life and death.

Another recurrent element informing the poems of *Gazing through Water* are memories; some poems offer fleeting glimpses into places and people from her childhood and youth, while the most poignant verses speak of our common struggle with ageing, the loss of youth, and mortality:

“Tottering Song”

*In life, there is no going back.
What’s left is an entourage of shadows
and a tottering song
piercing the breast:
a sword, a blood-red sword
thrust in and stuck askew.
Those slim young guys
oh, how they got strangled
in the neckties of routine.
Oh, how they got crucified
on the cross-beams of disease.*

*Those guys, so handsome,
no longer do they do their acrobatic feats
or make a fervent speech.
Swaying back and forth in slippers and in hammocks
they ruminate the bitterness of silence.
Once upon a time, daughter, I was beautiful,
I say, surprising her.
I have to prove it with photos
for it sounds like a lie. (Gazing 15)*

The pervading melancholy of the poems is peppered here and there with a touch of irony or mocking humor directed at the poetic subject herself, but also at us, her readers. “Listening” to the poetic voice, we find reassurance in her tone of serenity and wisdom, but also sheer joy in the rare artistry of her linguistic craft, as we share in the poet’s emotions and ponderings.

In *Gazing through Water*, Cabral depicts pain, sorrow, and the struggles of the “Unwilling Journey” that, ultimately, we all take, working effortlessly with various poetic forms—from sonnets to one-stanza poems of short eight verses or fewer, and to long free-verse ones. In all, the poet enchants the reader with the musicality of original alliterations, as in “Tottering Song”: “A vida não tem volta. / Sobra o séquito de sombras / e uma canção trôpega . . .” (*Gazing* 14). And if the English language doesn’t always allow for equivalent alliterations, Levitin creates his own, surprising the reader with rich imagery equally impactful and delicate:

*An indelible tattoo in me:
no simple spot, no stain on cloth or skin
but on the soul, that hidden flesh. . . .
There is a fainting green of branches
the pitch-black blackness of a starless night
red bleeding into amaranth. . . . (Gazing, “Tattoo” 33)*

Levitin’s adept translation redoubles the gift of Cabral’s poetry in an intimate book that allows us to “see” the poet, as well as the translator, only to find in their endeavor the face of our very own humanity:

“Portrait”

*Have you ever seen a bird
with roots?
Have you ever seen a tree*

*with wings?
Have you ever seen a fish
with a voice?*

Look at me. (Gazing 131)

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