

Herbert Morris

Spanish

for Ashley Baquero

I

It was in fourth grade I first heard it spoken,
 lilting, majestic, sonorous, impassioned,
 in a classroom remembered now distinctly,
 its angles, its geometry, still vivid,
 fifth floor, facing south, my desk near the window,
 struck on all sides by light, late morning light,
 snow in the muffled streets below ablaze,
 drifts sun-tipped, sun-capped, sun-streaked, wholly blinding,
 the very blindness for which one seemed destined
 (let it come down, let fall what now must fall).
 Shades had been drawn against a winter sun
 slanting across the fourth grade through the morning,
 shades half-linen, half-parchment, tinted black,
 drawn against those snow fires raging below,
 river to river, the room sealed off, darkened,
 the Spanish soon assailing us in waves,
 we with our elbows on our desks, our heads
 propped in our hands, our eyes soon riveted
 to the screen Miss Almendros had wheeled in
 on shaky, squeaking legs, the reels unfolding
 slowly, seductively, drawing us in,
 deeper and deeper southward, so far south
 there would seem little further south to sail for,
 latitudes vast, impossible, yet crucial,
 the sun intense, heat building ("The light, children,
 will blind you if you look too long, too closely"),
 ultimate, final places, places named,

places not named, places for which the Spanish
 shall not yet have devised its convolutions,
 its intricacies of drenched cadences,
 that long, dark, breathless rush of whispered music
 breaking on us as nothing broke or would break
 in the safety of fifth floors facing south,
 transporting us, attentive, wide-eyed, hushed,
 all fourth-grade fervor, expectation, promise
 (we who, through the morning, beyond all reason,
 past all logic, defying explanation,
 sat, heads propped in hands, awash with light,
 at stake as we had never been at stake,
 as perhaps we would never be at stake),
 to the gates where the bleached city of Spanish,
 ineluctable city, fabled city,
 lay shimmering, immaculate, in wait,
 porticoes, arches, doors festooned with garlands,
 entrances burdened with inflections, vowels,
 with the weight of ten centuries of syntax,
 alleyways paved, end to end, with the sum,
 that alone, the grand sum, nothing more, nothing,
 the visionary sum, whispered, half-whispered,
 intimated, implied, of intonation,
 intonation alone, no more, just that.

Miss Almendros, assigned fourth grade that autumn,
 slender, youthful, beautiful, olive-skinned,
 black-haired, black-eyed, late of Santo Domingo,
 a bun resting at the nape of her neck,
 clasped with a needle-shaped amber barrette
 delicately tipped with mother-of-pearl —
 “My great-grandmother came with this from Cádiz” —
 (princess of a world of which we knew nothing,
 imagined less, the old world, in the evening
 would her hair, undone, falling, reach her waist
 as she sat at the mirror, lamplit, brushing?),
 the face the face of the bride of Columbus,
 serene, shy, proud, the profile the same profile
 of the fiancée of each Emperor
 of the New World who set out from white harbors
 (names of the ports embarked from shall not matter;

it was in the mind they sailed, or would sail)
 in such salt-steeped, sweat-streaked, dark-bearded splendor,
 entering with small, delicate steps, half-steps,
 tiny brown pumps no larger than a child's,
 latched with a buckle, stockings sheer beige silk,
 her pace not slow, not rapid, but calm, measured,
 assured, despite her shyness, smiling to us
 as she entered the room, her teeth bright, even,
 perfect, teeth the bride of the Antilles
 might have dazzled us with, making her entrance,
 entering as no one, that year, would enter,
 as no one, that semester, hoped to enter,
 into those lives waiting on the fifth floor
 all that winter for something to redeem them,
 something, elbows on desks, heads propped in hands
 (language?, loveliness?, light?, skin shaded olive?),
 we who faced south, snow-struck, sun-struck, mute, blinded,
 raised her arm to the blackboard, drew an arc
 across a map of blue-green Caribbean,
 drew as no one, that winter, drew, or would draw,
 with her pointer tacked south, due south, so far south,
 steering a course through bays, coves, keys, reefs, inlets,
 Bahamas, Caicos, Leewards, Windwards, Indies,
 there seemed little further south to set sail for,
 conflagrations to the horizon, past it,
 ultimate, final places, late, fierce, sultry,
 places lacking names or, if once they bore them,
 fragrant with Spanish names, soft, dark names, lost now,
 abandoned, bleached, effaced, obliterated,
 forgotten with the crews that beached their vessels,
 with the draft and longitude of their landfalls,
 with the passion which fixed them, named them, dreamt them.

II

When the Nuestra Señora de Atocha
went down in darkness, 1622,
the night foul, a storm raging, the stars capsized,
a night the Spanish has the gift to translate,
at home in whatever must be relinquished,

has been relinquished, "curse of mariners,"
 gold bullion, jewels, silver in the hold
 hauled from Havana, Vera Cruz, the New World,
 coastlines only recently, it seemed, named,
 booty of untold value bound for Spain,
 the manifest listing each stone, each ingot,
 ingot by ingot, stone by stone, the captain's
 hand a fine mass of swoops, plumes, dips, swirls, arches
 (witness the log), scroll by scroll peacock-feather
 tracteries looping cross-stitch, line by line,
 the Queen's crest (scepter, profile, crown) embossed
 through the water-marks woven into foolscap,
 graceful, intricate, wound, rewound, grand, florid,
 its splendor, its nobility, a match
 for the language imprisoned in it, Spanish,
 the crew, belowdeck, roused by the nightwatch,
 himself swept from his perch high in the rigging
 (a dark-haired, green-eyed youth with a full beard
 whose bride waits in Jerez de la Frontera
 for a long-promised, much-deferred homecoming —
 "Thou tarry: dost thou not, Sire, yet desire
 to join thy bride here, one at heart, at hearth,
 as, of late, in Jerez, thou swore, thou pledged?"
 she had written at her mother's behest,
 the Spanish formal, distant, as seemed fitting),
 scrambling to topside, sleepy-lidded, naked,
 burdened with dreams of shipwreck, desolation
 (the dream's ironic, fateful twist: raw fact),
 feeling the planks groan, shudder, split beneath them,
 hearing the shrill scrape, portside, against coral,
 timbers water-logged, prow cracked, mainsail buckled,
 deck heaving, pitched, rain slashing through the sails,
 nails slowly forced from hammerlocks, bits, joists,
 torn from their mooring pivots, linkages
 bloated, warped, severed, gutted, ripped, dismembered,
 the jibs about to topple, those not toppled,
 the wind flaying their flesh, their faces seared,
 cries out, peering above them, "noche," "noche,"
 cries out, peering below, "el mar," "el mar,"
 a cry too late, too frail, this night, to save them,
 kneels on that deck too swamped to call a deck,

looks to the sky where once there was a sky,
 makes the sign of the cross (no sign suffices),
 catches a glimpse, a half-glimpse, dim, off-starboard,
 of a far coast, what wavers like a far coast,
 whose name may, or may not, be Florida,
 Spanish for flower, blossom, efflorescence,
 the Keys vague rumors, shoals, spits, to the west,
 thicket, swamp, mangrove, sandbar, reef, scrub, tide flat,
 tangled, dense, stricken, seen, not quite seen, foundered,
 in unison fingers those rosaries
 brought from Valladolid, Cádiz, Sevilla,
 from whatever field, village, random placement
 of donkey footpath, horsecart intersection,
 middle-of-nowhere thatched hut, long-parched pasture,
 young sailors of the Queen's fleet are recruited,
 from those dust-choked backwaters lacking names,
 where the dust, too, even the dust, goes nameless,
 carried in small brocade and velvet pouches
 girdling the midsection of each crew member,
 raises its arms to shield its eyes, heads, shoulders
 (no arm will shield, no gesture prove sufficient),
 whispers, seemingly certain someone hears them,
 "Estoy aquí"; once more: "Estoy aquí,"
 murmurs against the dark, against the waves,
 as though a murmur might yet turn it back,
 "Nuestra Señora de Atocha, Nuestra
 Señora de Atocha, Nuestra Señora . . . ,"
 voices strangled, beards soaked with rain, tears, darkness,
 sensing Spanish, Spanish alone, shall bear it,
 should there be anything, in time, to bear it
 (bear it, not save them), knowing nothing, in time,
 nothing, I tell you, durable enough
 to withstand what comes down, sustain such blows,
 tender with the tenderness of the foundered,
 the sad-eyed, the soft-spoken, the black-bearded,
 the long-beleaguered, the ones drenched, late, lost,
 the ones whose lips accommodate the language
 ("Estoy aquí," "Estoy aquí") precisely.

Let all grief be borne on the wings of Spanish;
 let anguish know, at last, its home, its name.

*If it is loss we are to suffer, losses,
let it pronounce itself with the inflections
of the intensest, the profoundest, Spanish,
the manifest listing, gemstone by gemstone,
drowning by drowning, sailor, grief by grief,
the sum of anguish, nothing less, the sum
of whatever, before this, has gone nameless.*

III

With a tug of the cord looped to its frame,
Miss Almendros unfurled, full-length, a screen
hung on the side wall of Room 507,
with the title, *Shores of the Caribbean*
(on the sound-track guitars working their way,
softly, into Latin beats, folk airs, dance tunes),
began, slowly, seductively, translating
what the narrator (our first taste of Spanish),
in the deepest basso imaginable,
crooned to us, coddled us with, interspersing
the travelogue with personal asides:

"This is the island, children, I have come from.
Our family, many times, picnicked here,
this very beach — see that inlet, that cove? —
pink sand glowing iridescent at sunset,
lighting, end to end, all night, this whole coast,
this vast south coast, mile after mile in flames,
no end, none, to the beaches, to the light,
beach after beach on fire, flame heaped on flame."

The camera, filming from a plane, was panning
across a stretch of the Dominican
littoral — sand, waves, thatched hut, cobalt sky,
more sky than one had ever seen at one time
("These palms, called royal, these hills, these pink beaches:
I know them as you know these streets, this room,
this light slanting across your desk-tops, mornings,
ice and snow glittering to the horizon
enough, more than enough, it seems, to blind you,

block after block on fire, flame heaped on flame,
 lighting your eyes, playing across your faces,
 elbows on desks, heads propped in hands, waiting
 for Spanish to break over you in waves,
 as it soon shall, ten centuries of Spanish.”),
 swooping low enough in one long, extended,
 dizzying shot which left the fourth grade gasping,
 intoxicated, that the sand, the breakers,
 pink sand, waves, thatched hut, endless cobalt sky,
 could, if one leaned far enough from the cockpit
 (the pilot, goggled, looked back at us, grinned,
 inhaled, waved, gunned the engine, dove, descended),
 far enough, in fact, from a window desk
 on the fifth floor that winter, to scoop sand
 with the fingers, feel salt spray graze the cheek.

When, in the dark, I looked at Miss Almendros
 by the light of the camera projector,
 flickering, candle-like, against drawn shades,
 dappling back wall, side wall, kindling our faces,
 turning in my seat to the rear, half-turning,
 turning as no one else, that winter, turned,
 concerned that, reason unknown, her translation,
 faltering, broke off, reached its mumbled end,
 quite abruptly, in mid-sentence, had stopped,
 though the voice on the sound-track, unrelenting,
 cultivated, mellifluous, plunged on
 against the plucking of those same guitars
 strumming their way, island by island, southward,
 beach after beach on fire, flame heaped on flame,
 Bahamas, Caicos, Leewards, Windwards, Indies
 (“Now we are entering the fabled city . . .”),
 and the reel-spool, oblivious, spent, mindless,
 bobbin to bobbin, fly-wheel, wind, rewind,
 continued, two beats to the second, clicking,
 I saw her head slumped, half-slumped, in her hand,
 barrette clasping the bun knotting her hair
 snaring what light there was for it to snare,
 mother-of-pearl paving its inlaid surface,
 set by hand in a dim back street in Cádiz,
 cobbled, dusty, two centuries before,
 hair, should it fall, one dreamt fell waist-length, past it,

cobbled, dusty, two centuries before,
 hair, should it fall, one dreamt fell waist-length, past it,
 noticed her fingers curl to shield her eyes,
 eyes no longer raised to the side wall screen,
 the narration droning on, untranslated
 ("Now we are entering the fabled city . . ."),
 the class, abandoned, aimlessly adrift,
 battered by Spanish, wave on wave, drenched, swamped,
 thought I saw — heard? — some momentary spasm,
 a seizure, nothing more, trembling, a shudder,
 tenuous, voiceless, private, inadvertent,
 wind itself through her bones, convulse her shoulders,
 sob, half-sob, cry, half-cry, muffled implosion,
 saw, half-saw, tears make tracks across her cheeks,
 heard — dreamt I heard, or heard? — words, words in Spanish,
 escape her lips, words the bride of Columbus
 might have whispered, from whatever impelled her —
 pity, rage, fury, some specific passion
 whose depth, whose nature, one would never guess —,
 could we know, and in Spanish, what she whispered
 ("Now we are entering the fabled city . . ."),
 what she suffered, the extent of her anguish,
 her pain — that foremost —, the source of her pain,
 that fever of things undisclosed, things longed-for,
 I who, of course, understood none of it,
 none of it, on the fifth floor, shades drawn, blinded,
 neither light as it stunned that palm-girt coast,
 her Dominican coast (mine, now, as well;
 "Don't look too long, too closely: it will blind you"),
 nor the thing that escaped her in the dark,
 lit, half-lit, by the camera projector,
 her profile flickering in stark relief,
 understood nothing of the Spanish for it,
 deprived the weight of it across my shoulders,
 its heat across the lips, within my life,
 the burden of ten centuries of syntax,
 the tang of intonation, evocation,
 momentous, clamorous, searing the tongue,
 fabled city, adventurer, we enter,
 are about to, if only in the mind,
 tentative, faltering, in our advances,
 we on the fifth floor that long, snow-bound winter,

anything, music, loveliness, our blindness,
 we who understood nothing of the waiting
 nor the precise nature of the redemption,
 those unimaginable intricacies
 (Now we are entering . . .), those convolutions,
 of a tongue so far south, as we were promised,
 there seemed little south of here to set sail for,
 ultimate, final places, last words, first words,
 words late, words fierce, words sultry, visionary,
 latitudes vast, impossible, yet crucial,
 none of it, I tell you, for now apparent,
 ready to surrender itself to us,
 only a sense of thresholds, entrances,
 fourth-grader, head in hands, elbows on desk,
 waiting for light, for language, turned, half-turned,
 turning as no one else, that winter, turned,
 needed, from love or ignorance, to turn,
 dreaming, nights, of the bride of the Antilles,
 shoes she wore, did not wear, heel, instep, buckle,
 contours, dimensions, textures, play of light,
 barrette, hair, tears, eyes (shielded), cry, half-cry,
 glimpsed in shadow behind him, of what issued
 from her lips when she spoke, should the bride speak,
 from his window seat stricken, speechless, hushed,
 assailed by light, on all sides light, more light,
 the whole south coast in flames, flame heaped on flame,
 by wave on wave of Spanish, slow encroachments
 of a knowledge — shimmering, bleached-white city
 we are about to enter — to be come by
 later, much later, in streets distant from here,
 south of here, doors festooned with garlands, now
 (Miss Almendros, head slumped, shoulders convulsed,
 shielding her eyes, weeping on the fifth floor,
 whispering what no one, that winter, whispered),
 just now, beginning to take shape, take root,
 enter his dreaming (Now we are entering . . .)
 with the Spanish for it, proud, deep, majestic,
 filled with the weight of some infinite sorrow,
 the unexplained, the unexplainable,
 the sun-streaked, salt-struck centuries of it,
 ten, count them, count them (Now, now we have entered).