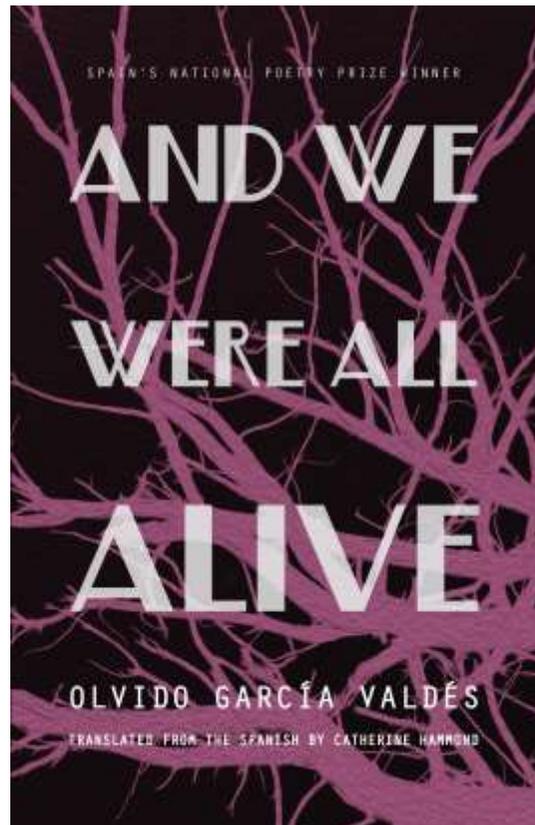


***And We Were All Alive: New Spanish poetry by Olvido García Valdés*
Translated and with an essay by Catherine Hammond**



Once in a while, a book comes along, so good you don't want to put it down, and when you do, out of necessity, it hurts. This is one of those books. We are so happy to share with you today poems from the award-winning book *Y todos estábamos vivos* ([*And We Were All Alive*](#), Cardboard House Press, 2016) by Olvido García Valdés, translated and accompanied by an excellent essay about the craft and process by the acclaimed Catherine Hammond. These poems in English have not appeared in any other publication but the book. The poem beginning “spider mothers” was used in a public art project for the city of Phoenix. We hope you'll like them as much as we did.

And remember, in September and beyond: read and share your favorite poems in translation. Let us know the authors you discover by using #NTM2017. We hope that Olvido García Valdés will be one of them. We're looking forward to hearing from you!

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

Poems from *And We Were All Alive / Y todos estábamos vivos*

madres araña, las mujeres vamos
siendo reales desde los treinta, llegamos
a serlo a los cincuenta; algunas,
madres; otras, sólo reales; arañas, si
tienen hijas, hijas de araña, sí

spider mothers, we women are working on
becoming real from thirty on, we arrive
there at fifty; some of us,
mothers; others, only real; spiders, if
we have daughters, spider daughters, yes

*

Juntas en la cocina sin apenas
hablar, un lugar no exclusivo
de mujeres, que sigue al parecer siendo
exclusivo. Casi nada en común,
salvo contradicciones que sujetan
y asemejan. Nos enmarca este espacio
al que creemos ya no pertenecer. De ellos
el mundo y la sala grande, conversación
de lengua reductora, el chiste sexual,
la perspectiva hollada, cierto
poder, risas, el mundo. Al mundo
salgo que es único consuelo, campos
y árboles hoy que es mayo, y la savia
estalla verde y varón según la lengua,
el mundo que consuela y el que no,
ajenos ambos hoy a mí, que camino
con daño en lo ajeno que la vida deja.

Together the women in the kitchen,
not talking much, a place not exclusive
to women that continues to seem exclusive.
Almost nothing in common,
except contradictions that bind them
and make them similar. This space defines us
even though we believe we no longer belong. Of them
the world and the living room, a conversation

with reductive language, the sexual joke,
well-worn perspective, certain
power, laughter, the world. Into the world
I go, a solitary comfort, fields
and trees this day in May, and the sap,
according to language, explodes green and male,
the world that consoles and the one that does not,
both foreign for me today, I walk
damaged into the unknown that life leaves.

*

Estar bien, temperatura que toma
como pauta la fría y húmeda
de la tierra, del humus
o mantillo; consiste en caldear
la casa hasta que el frío
en las paredes de piedra y tierra y cal
retroceda, que las sábanas reduzcan
el espasmo de estar aún mojadas y la espalda
no avise, que el pulmón no se haga sentir,
el bienestar consiste en no sentir, y sentirse
de ese modo bien.

Observar el gesto
de quien se acerca al radiador dejando fuera
por el momento la intemperie, guardar
conciencia, saber que todo es
por el momento. No ser quien dice:
yo no tengo recuerdos, era una niña campesina,
estudiar, segar hierba, pero no lo recuerdo,
es algo físico, no está, vivo ahora
tres días en Madrid y el resto
en Bilbao, me organizo, trabajo mucho.
Palabras de la prensa, sonrisa de leve
desafío, pedir guardar memoria, no
perder conciencia del frío que hace.

To be well, temperature that takes
as its norm the cold and damp
of the earth, from humus
or mulch; that consists of heating
the house until the cold

in the walls of stone and earth and lime
retreats, until the bedsheets reduce
the spasm that comes from their being still wet and the back
issues no warning, that the lung does not make itself felt,
well-being consists of not feeling, and to feel
well in that case.

Watch the expression
of whoever comes near the radiator leaving
bad weather outside for the moment, remain
mindful, know that everything is
for the moment. Do not be the one who says:
I have no memories, I was a girl from the country,
studying, gathering herbs, but I do not remember that,
it is something physical, not here, now I live
three days a week in Madrid and the rest
in Bilbao, I stay organized, I work hard.
Words from the press, a slight smile
of defiance, try to hold on to memory, do not
lose awareness of the cold outside.

*

Entre lo literal de lo que ve
y escucha, y otro lugar no evidente
abre su ojo la inquietud. Al lado,
mano pálida de quien convive
con la muerte, cráneo hirsuto. Atendemos
a la oquedad, máscaras que una boca
elabora; distanciada y carnal,
mueve el discurso, lo expande
y desordena, lo concentra, lo apacienta
o dispersa como el lobo a sus corderos.
El sonido de un gong. Es literal
la muerte y las palabras, las bromas
luego de hombres solos, broma y risa
literal. Todo sentido visible, todo
lo visible produce y niega su sentido.
Si respiras en la madrugada, si ves
cómo vuelven imágenes, contéplalas
venir, apaciéntalas, deja que estalle
la inquietud como corderos.

Between the literal meaning of what you see
and hear and another less obvious place,
inquietude opens its eye. On the side,
the pale hand of whoever lives
with death, hairy skull. We pay attention
to the hollow, masks a mouth
makes, distant and carnal,
that drives the discourse, expands
and disrupts, focuses, pastures
or scatters it as a wolf its lambs.
The sound of a gong. Death
is literal and the words, the jokes
then of men alone, joke and literal
laughter. All sense visible, all
that is visible produces and denies such sense.
If you breathe in the early morning, if you see
how images return, behold them
coming, pasture them, allow them to shatter
the inquietude as lambs.

*

Lo material del tiempo es el movimiento, se halla fuera del alma,
pero lo formal del tiempo es la medida del movimiento, viene del alma.
Juan Duns Scotto

Levanta la taza de
café y se la lleva a los labios, piensa
en la confusión al oír los mensajes, cómo
su propia voz grabada por error desde el coche
le pareció otra voz. ¿Las voces
que nos hablan son siempre en otro estrato
la de quien las escucha? ¿Suenan
en los huecos donde ocurre
la vida? La pena, por ejemplo,
con que se ha despertado por la noche,
aunque no remitía
a la voz que había creído oír en el teléfono,
volvía a la niñez donde se hacía
presente aquella voz.

Dos días, dos veces
miró el pueblo de lejos, y sí, ésa era figura
de la pena.

Un espacio intermedio
—hilo de sueño hila su sustancia, y la oquedad,
una concavidad en que se cabe
enteramente—. De pena, no de culpa,
la sustancia.

Lo anota, como si
propusiera: mirar, no comer.

The material nature of time is movement; it is found outside the soul,
but the formal nature of time is the measure of movement; it comes from the soul.

John Duns Scotus

You raise the cup
of coffee and carry it to your lips, think
about the confusion, listening to the messages, how
your own voice recorded by mistake from the car
seemed to belong to someone else. The voices
that talk to us, are they always from a dimension
different from ours? Do they sound
in the hollows where life
occurs? The sadness, for example,
with which you had awakened in the night,
although it did not connect
to the voice you thought you heard on the phone,
that sadness went back to childhood where that voice
used to live.

Two days, twice
you looked at the village from a distance, and yes, that was the shape
of sorrow.

A space between:
a dream thread spins its material, and the recess,
a hollow you fit inside
completely. From sorrow, not from guilt,
that cloth.

You make a note, as if
to suggest: look, do not eat.

A Day with Olvido García Valdés

One late summer day, Olvido García Valdés and I sat together on the patio of the cafeteria of the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, the building that houses Pablo Picasso's "Guernica." We talked about the nature of her poetry, influences, approaches to creating work, and my translations of her book, *Y todos estábamos vivos / And We Were All Alive*. In 2007, García Valdés won Spain's highest award in poetry, the Premio Nacional or National Poetry Prize, for this volume.

After coffee that morning, we began talking about her use of a *supresión de elipsis*. This intentional exclusion of narrative elements, often grammatical, works in such a way we cannot directly ascertain personal details such as the identity, gender, or physical appearance of characters. Certainty eludes us. The entire book begins mid-sentence; the poet uses no titles on individual poems but indicates a new work with a bold font for the first word. Often this word is not capitalized and end punctuation may be eliminated. Because much information is not on the page, my first priority had to do with maintaining the multiple possibilities inherent in the language without losing any sense that meaning itself is unstable and difficult to pin down.

Translation, particularly of third person singular verbs, becomes particularly problematic. Spanish conjugated verbs do not require an additional subject or a subject pronoun. In English we need two elements at least: *he, she, or it* says may become the single word *dice* in Spanish with the subject implied. Olvido insists we as readers may not know who the subject is, therefore a gendered pronoun is often inappropriate. She and I talked about one solution, that of using the word *one* to translate a reflexive verb; *se mueve* becomes *one moves*. Clearly gender remains undefined, but the language tends to sound stilted and weak, an impulse that works against the original poetry. My goal was to find ways to handle the reticent nature of these pronouns with their vagueness, yet to produce dynamic language in English.

Instead of a one-size-fits-all solution, I used several strategies to translate Olvido's third person singular verbs. In the first line of the book, *hears blood beat in the ear*, I chose to omit the subject altogether and begin the poem mid-sentence. Olvido and I also talked about the word *you* in English as an undesignated pronoun. I assured her there are moments when such usage does not imply a specific person as do *tú* and *usted*. In English we can say *you are walking down the street*, without having any sense of who that person is. I translated another first line with that strategy: *You raise the cup / of coffee and carry it to your lips*. Sometimes the familiar command worked well: *Raise your eyes*. Changing from one part of speech to another also seemed effective. For instance, in the poem starting with the line, *We are two giants*, I switched from the conjugated verb form, *Que no quería*, to a participle that did not require a pronoun, *Wanting nothing*.

Missing language elements provide a base for exploring this poetry of the unsaid. That day Olvido also provided a key to imagery and content. Although she often works from specific sources, references to those are generally omitted from the work itself. She

and I were discussing the opening of the first poem in the second section of her book, *Deaf and blind, they make music—a lyre, / a flute. Beautiful and bald. Daughters / in their laps or nearby, tiny. Without eyes / ears or hair.* I explained my difficulty in making sense of a poem that seemed to have mythic origins, yet I could not identify the source. Olvido asked me to wait a minute and headed off to the art museum bookstore across the courtyard. She brought back a postcard to help me understand some of her ekphrastic influences. The opening lines provide a fairly literal description of the lower right corner of a surrealist painting, *Un mundo* (1929) by Ángeles Santos. Women hold small children on their laps. No one has ears. All eyes are closed or socket-like. The mothers are *attentive, meanwhile, / remain at attention, they make music.* Olvido explained, “The women make music but have no ears. The music is within.” In this poem, as in many, Olvido focuses on women in creating her poetic universe.

Another poem demonstrates her complex use of sources. The frieze around the top of the Parthenon in Athens includes several figures leading sacrificial cattle. The initial lines of the poem describe one of those scenes while moving us simultaneously into a space the poet frequently occupies, that of *la extrañeza*, of strangeness, wonder, and mystery. Here is the complete poem:

Like sleepers they moved, preoccupied, leading
the cows by their tethers, daybreakers almost.
From another view, sallow, beauty
fading. That bellowing cow
seals skin in dream. It was you,
lost in thought and self, skin and desires
of memory. Remember how damp, how hot,
how butterflies welled up, scarlet emissaries
of light; toward the cows we went
without knowing they were there, slow, ruminating
at midday, golden, all but buried.

As she explained the Parthenon as one source, Olvido went on to describe her own experience while walking through a field in her hometown in Asturias. Two cows were lying down, *casi enterradas*, almost buried in high grass. Whether the setting was marble or grass or earth is not what is important to the poet. What matters is the sense of ambiguity she plays with. She later clarified in an email, “What I’m trying to explain is that my poetry is not simply ekphrastic. It is true that it frequently works with related art (or philosophy or literature or film), but these influences sometimes merge with and assimilate elements of life, of my life, that enter the poem.”

The phrase, *No para sí*, forms the title for the second section of the book and has a different relationship with visual art. I had translated that phrase, *Not for Self*, which Olvido seemed to like for its removal of gendering. We discussed the untranslatable shadow meaning that dangled *no* and *sí* from *para*. Clearly she intended the visual opposition of *no* and *yes*, yet understood that secondary sense was not included in the translation. This instance provides an example of the value of bilingual editions of

translations: readers themselves may discover alternate meaning. “The phrase *no para sí* is like a mobile,” she explained. This sense of balance also works in her title, *Y todos estábamos vivos*. Early on I had translated that phrase *And We Were All Still Alive*. Olvido and I had emailed back and forth about my addition of the word *still*. After our talk in the museum about her sense of balance, I removed the adverb. The words themselves must move like a Calder.

Another aspect of the poetry we discussed lay in its base in philosophy, the field of study for Olvido’s master’s degree. She explained that philosophy forms the roots of her writing, *las raíces*, while *la extrañeza* forms the branches. This relationship between the rational and irrational or *sobrenatural* finds constant play in the poetry. In the poem with an epigraph from John Duns Scotus, we see how these roots and branches work together. We encounter in that epigraph a comment on the nature of time and its relationship to the soul. *The material nature of time is movement; it is found outside the soul, but the formal nature of time is the measure of movement; it comes from the soul.* As Olvido moves into the poem itself we see details of daily life along with contemplative commentary. *You raise the cup / of coffee and carry it to your lips, think / about the confusion, listening to the messages, how / your own voice, recorded by mistake from the car / seemed to belong to someone else.* At the end of this poem, we proceed into the mysterious world where much of the poetry resides in counterpoint to both the philosophical and earlier everyday elements. *A space between: / a dream thread spins its material, and the recess, / a hollow you fit inside / completely. From sorrow, not from guilt, / that cloth. / You make a note, as if / perhaps to suggest: Look, do not eat.*

Early in our conversation, Olvido made a comment that much of modern poetry had lost its song, its ability to sing. She pointed out that during the Classical Period of Spanish literature a sense of song was inherent in poetry. Often Olvido references writers of that time either in language choice or by using certain figures of speech. An example comes from her poem that begins *came, lay eyes, a thousand eyes*. The first part of one line, *Entantoquederrosayazucena llamamos*, comes from “Sonnet XXIII” by Garcilaso de la Vega, who wrote during the sixteenth century. Olvido squeezes together the words from his first line, *En tanto que de rrosa y azucena*. His poem continues, *se muestra la color en vuestro gesto*. Loosely translated, the whole phrase, *In as much as the color in your face seems to come from the rose and the lily*, captures a sense that the dewy, young girl will age. I extended my translation of Olvido’s long word to reference both lines, *Whilelilyandrosestillcoloryourcheeks*, to provide additional information for the English-speaking reader who might not recognize the reference. My intent also was to maintain the musicality of the original. Note that Olvido used a double *r* as the beginning letter for the word *rrosas* in the middle of her quotation, an archaic spelling to capture the pronunciation of that initial letter *r*.

Other references come from certain figures of speech popular in classical literature. I had been puzzled by the following couplet: *Han brotado las negras de la nada, de la / noche han venido golondrina y cucaracha*. Who or what are the *negras*, the referents of this phrase? Olvido just laughed. “They are the *golondrina* and *cucaracha*, swallow and cockroach, found at the end of the next line.” *Hyperbaton*, which is quite a

bit easier to use in Spanish than in English, separates words that generally might be placed together, often inverting normal word order. The translation was simple enough once I understood how she was working. Black, they have sprouted from nothing, swallow / and cockroach come from the night.

Another insight came from this same couplet. Olvido thought using the *cucaracha* in this manner was funny. She enjoys the sense of the everyday, the mundane, which works as high art, yet includes common or low references. We had a lengthy discussion about the word *grumos*, which had presented me with serious obstacles in several poems. She used the word often, sometimes in terms of dirt or earth, sometimes as parts of trees or roots. For me, until I worked my way through my own prejudices, the word in Spanish and its translations felt coarse and somehow out of character in these poems. I knew the meanings: *lump* or *curd* or *clot*. For instance, curds of milk can translate as *grumos de leche*. Using her own pocket Spanish-English dictionary, Olvido expressed a preference for *lump* or *clump*. That these words embody their common nature is exactly the point. She talked about lumps in sand or in pasta flour. “They are places of resistance against the material,” she explained. “When the flour becomes pasta they are gone.” In the poem that begins *Face to face*, she described buds on plants as they burst forth for spring, *grumos / de primavera dentro de la máquina*. I translated this as *clumps / of springtime inside the machine*. As we talked about this moment, I said that this eruption seemed tender. “Yes,” she said, “and violent at the same time.”

Another classical literary device appears in many poems, as the poet repeats a word within the poem, often with a grammatical shift. This occurs in the poem that begins *We are two giants*. The final line and a half, *el roce / de tus dedos al rozar las cosas con los míos*, illustrates how the repetition destabilizes our understanding and expectations of the language itself: the noun *el roce* morphs into the verb *rozar*. Whatever we thought the word might mean also shifts immediately, *the touch / of your fingers while touching things with mine*. We may ask what actually is happening here in this fragmented narrative. Ordinarily, the expectation of comfort and increased certainty accompanies repetition. Instead, in these poems, we experience the limitations of language, along with an unnerving discomfort that comes from a lack of stability, even as the words themselves repeat.

One of the last of my big questions for Olvido had to do with her personal relationship with Persephone, a frequent reference. Did the Greek goddess indeed stand in for the poet in many of the poems, including the first one in the book? Instead of directly answering, she asked if the mother and the daughter might be interchangeable. We were back to the question of suppression of ellipsis. Near the end of that poem, we have Persephone’s name, but according to Olvido, we are unclear if Persephone is the actor at this point or the addressee, *from / where, Persephone, looking at it, / contemplating it / in the heart, feeling how blood / pulses through the ear*. She went on to explain that she and I, we are both Persephone and Demeter, both mother and daughter. Although her mother had died, she was still very much with her. We talked briefly about my mother and my children and her son. The sense of looking forward and looking back, this duality, pervades the poetry.

Despite her many Catholic references and the way, often enough, people in Spain live within some religious context, Olvido is an avowed agnostic. She doesn't believe in life after death. "But I desire to believe in it," she said to me. "Debe de ser muy bueno creer en ella." Perhaps what she achieves in her poetry through this exploration of our world from the realm of the dead is what Olvido herself refers to as the "component of wonder that we share when we see life from death and that provokes intensification in the manner in which we see and perceive everything." This interconnectivity between what is alive and what is not, between the natural and human worlds, centered on the sacred or *la extrañeza* for which there is no rational explanation, lies at the core of this poetry.

Olvido and I had talked for hours. It was nearly four o'clock in the afternoon when she, my husband Troy, and I went for lunch up the hill behind the Reina Sofía to a neighborhood restaurant Olvido liked. She ordered two huge paellas for the three of us to share. One featured rabbit; the second, an abundance of seafood. Together we drank a good bottle of vino tinto and celebrated our day together.

About the author:



Poet, essayist and translator, **Olvido García Valdés** was born on December 2, 1950 in Asturias, Spain. She holds degrees in Philosophy from the University of Valladolid, and Romance Philology from the University of Oviedo. She resides in Toledo, Spain. Her poetry collections, except for her most recent *Lo solo del animal* (2012), have been published together in one volume *Esa polilla que delante de mí revolotea* (Poesía reunida 1982-2008). She has translated into Spanish Pier Paolo Pasolini's poetry books, and in collaboration a wide anthology of Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva. She is also author of the biographical essay *Teresa de Jesús*, texts for art catalogs and numerous works of literary reflection. She was co-editor of the literary magazines *Los Infolios* and *El signo del gorrión*. Among other awards, in 2007 she was awarded the Premio Nacional de Poesía (National Poetry Prize) for her collection *Y todos estábamos vivos* (*And we were all alive*).

About the translator:



Catherine Hammond's translation of Olvido García Valdés book, *Y todos estábamos vivos*, winner of Spain's Premio Nacional de Poesía, 2007, comes from [Cardboard House Press](#). Her manuscript of Carmen Boullosa's selected poems was a finalist at *Drunken Boat*'s book contest. Other translations have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Field*, *Words without Borders*, and many other national magazines. Hammond's own poetry has been anthologized in *Fever Dreams: Contemporary Arizona Poetry* from University of Arizona Press, in *MARGIN: Exploring Modern Magical Realism*, and in *Yellow Silk* from Warner Books. She has three Pushcart nominations.