

Tomas Unger

BOUND TO LIFE: ON CARLOS DRUMMOND DE ANDRADE

In José Saramago's *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa crosses paths with one of his fictive alter egos ("Today, at last, we meet!" Carlos Drummond de Andrade exclaims during a similarly fantastic encounter with the shade of his father). In Saramago's imagining, Pessoa has this to say to one of the selves that gave him voice: "Loneliness is not living alone, loneliness is the inability to keep someone or something within us company." It's a thought that speaks to the heart—multitudinous, yes—of a poet who has become an elemental presence in the literary landscape and even the popular imagination of his native Brazil, where he is known simply as Drummond.

As Richard Zenith's sensitive new translations suggest, Drummond had many selves which he could not keep company: a slain milkman, a cross-dresser before her time, a stricken god, a boy crying in the night. Zenith's introduction makes much of Drummond's sense of himself as an "awkward misfit" (that self-characterization comes from one of his poems). How can such a man have become so beloved? There's the gentle spirit of self-deprecation, the almost boyish imagination, the sly humor of a sensible mind seeing a world ever so slightly askew—qualities which make Drummond strangely approachable even in his most remote moments (and they are numerous). He could almost elicit comparison with Frost, that other national poet, except that in this case no one has ever suggested that he's the half-willful victim of misreading, or that his attractive traits are some sort of veneer. The solitariness is certainly there. Yet listen long enough, and Drummond's quietly encompassing humanity becomes as unmistakable as his reticence—which is why that reticence has the unlikely effect of endearing him to us all the more.

There's a moment in a late interview that tells us much about the poet and the man. Drummond remembers riding one of the trams that dot his poetry (one reason the collection's title is apt: he's as democratic a traveler as Whitman) and spotting a young woman beside him, eating corn on the cob. Just ten or twenty years earlier, Drummond marvels, you couldn't have imagined such a thing, old-world manners being what they were. If the young Drummond won some infamy for a poem that celebrates the most vanishingly bland of happenings, finding "a stone in the middle of the road" ("I'll never forget that event," he says, in what could well count as canonical modernist utterance), we find the older Drummond as affected by a more intimately human non-event: by the contented solitude, the unselfconsciousness, of the young woman simply eating her corn.

Yet the interest of the interview comes in the way a second, contradictory self breaks in: "She didn't offer me any," Drummond goes on to say, almost plaintively. This too would have been unthinkable in the prior world. Mark Strand, who along with Elizabeth Bishop was one of Drummond's most devoted translators, remarked on the characteristic way in which humor and seriousness, irony and sincerity, commingle in his work. Sure enough, what we have in this instance is the sort of comic cry that comes again and again in Drummond's poetry, as in these amusing and oddly affecting lines from "Residue"—

If a little of everything remains,
 why won't a little of me
 remain? In the train
 for the north, in the boat,
 in newspaper ads?
 A little of me in London,
 a little of me somewhere.

—and it tells us how irresolvably, in Drummond and in how many like him, the wish for exchange comes up against the innate need and then the ingrained habit of solitude. This is worth

remembering since the latter impulse can be more plainly visible in the poetry, so much so that some have seen one of the most self-concealing travelers through Drummond's poetry as a self-portrait, and a definitive one at that:

The man behind the mustache
is serious, simple and strong.
He hardly ever talks.
Only a very few are friends
with the man behind the glasses and mustache.

From a certain standpoint, "serious, simple and strong" is everything the poet is not; these poems offer abundant proof of that. Unless we say that the three summary adjectives sketch only the outward semblance of a self, a self that is finally as hidden and—just possibly—as given to absurdity, complexity, human weakness as Drummond's. "All things are possible," he writes elsewhere, "only I am impossible." The displaced self-portrait is resonant for arriving in a poem that is otherwise so rife with the personal pronoun, with uncontainable confession. The stanza admits, then, to a marked tension between outward stoicism and that "inner hubbub" of which selves are made. Here is Drummond's "Seven-Sided Poem," which brings that hubbub well within our hearing, and—against whatever odds—makes it affecting:

When I was born, one of those twisted
angels who live in the shadows said,
"Carlos, get ready to be a misfit in life!"

The houses watch the men
who chase after women.
If desire weren't so rampant,
the afternoon might be blue.

The passing streetcar's full of legs:
white and black and yellow legs.
My heart asks why, my God, so many legs?
My eyes, however,
ask no questions.

The man behind the mustache
is serious, simple, and strong.
He hardly ever talks.
Only a very few are friends
with the man behind the glasses and mustache.

My god, why have you forsaken me
if you knew that I wasn't God,
if you knew that I was weak.

World so large, world so wide,
if my name were Clyde,
it would be a rhyme but not an answer.
World so wide, world so large,
my heart's even larger.

I shouldn't tell you,
but this moon

and this brandy
make me sentimental as hell.

“I shouldn’t tell you”: it’s often that we hear, or overhear, Drummond counseling himself against speech; it’s as if he spoke with the knowledge of being, at any point, just one step away from committing those acts of presence, those rueful immediacies, that make his poems impossible to disentangle from the personal. “Don’t tell anyone,” runs the close of another poem, this one more plainly in the mode of soliloquy, “no one knows or will know.” If the immediate referent there is a difficult love, the lines speak to us in the way they speak at the same time of a more than contingent condition; of the self that, through all its changing circumstances, in love or out, craves articulation even as the poet searches out some metaphor that might make it present:

And you keep walking,
melancholy and upright.
You’re the palm tree, you’re the shout
no one heard in the theater
and the lights all went out.

And yet, this saving caveat: Silence that begins as either a refusal or a failure of speech may become something else entirely. The need of connection sometimes finds other means than words. One of Drummond’s most moving poems, “Journey Through the Family,” owes its force to the way it gradually, feelingly persuades us of this. Here the poet finds the imaginative freedom to summon the shade of his father—yet remains possessed of the earthly hurt, the fidelity to the immovable fact of character, to know their encounter cannot culminate in speech. The poem achieves its hypnotic effect through the kind of patient repetition which quotation necessarily wrongs, but suffice it to say that the first few stanzas circle back to the same note:

In the desert of Itabira
the shadow of my father
took me by the hand.
So much lost time.
But he didn’t say anything.
It wasn’t day or night.
A sigh? A bird in flight?
But he didn’t say anything.

Many lines out, the poem hasn’t journeyed very far from its beginnings:

I saw sorrow, misunderstanding
and more than one old resentment
dividing us in the darkness.
The hand I wouldn’t kiss,
the food I wasn’t given,
refusal to ask forgiveness.
Pride. Terror in the night.
But he didn’t say anything.

The poem hasn’t journeyed very far, that is to say, on the surface. Franco Fortini once wrote of the “terror-stricken or brazen compassion” which compels us to give the dead new life in art, and Drummond’s pained refrain belies just what a forward work of compassion his poem accomplishes in its own time, just what a self-transporting listening he is all the while undertaking. “There were various silences / couched in his silence,” Drummond comes to see—other selves and other silences, not least his own. Finally the son’s hurts speak to the father’s, and

it is impossible to know that anything separates “my lack of friends, / his lack of kisses, / our difficult lives.” If such melancholy knowledge of self and other can be, at best, an imperfect solace, this does nothing to diminish the sense of closeness it brings. Drummond is moved to plainly impassioned utterance: “It’s as if all of me burned / with poignant love. / Today, at last, we meet!” What makes its way as memorably into the English, thanks to Zenith, is the plain mysteriousness of the poem’s close, its air of lingering hurt and interrupting ablution:

The waters no longer permit me
to make out his face in the distance,
on the other side of seventy...

I felt that he forgave me,
but he didn’t say anything.

The waters cover his mustache,
the family, Itabira, everything.

From the desert of Itabira, then, to his own desert places. Yet, here as elsewhere, a quality of yearning transforms what might otherwise prove a final isolation. In something so fragile and unmistakable as tone, maybe, rests the isolate speaker’s humanity, the deep vein of resemblance that effaces the awkward fact of his distance. Drummond, looking at a family portrait, is both self-conscious and self-forgetting, strangely apart from those he observes, but no less a part of them for it: “I’ve lost track of who went, / who stays. All I grasp / is the strange idea of family // moving through the flesh.” An equally affecting moment of vision comes in “Hand in Hand,” an *ars poetica* that becomes, more broadly, an expression of human solidarity—one that has transcended the political moment that gave it rise:

I’m bound to life, and I look at my companions.
They’re taciturn but nourish great hopes.
In them, I consider capacious reality.

That “man behind the mustache”—how changed he seems here, how much more multitudinous in number. Should we say that Drummond has made this hopeful revision by casting himself in his contemporaries’ image, or by casting his contemporaries in his own? Both at once. Drummond is making a case for transcendence (“consider” all but contains “find”), yet we couldn’t be further from the sage who said, “Let us treat the men and women well: treat them as if they were real: perhaps they are.” If the title line (“Let’s stay together and go hand in hand”) more plainly brings out what a common humanity is at work here, the striking thing is to find that selfsame humanity well-kept by the more taciturn lines above, for all their abstractness. These lines—the true texture of which, idle cry though this is, just cannot be gotten in translation—are more complete, and more completely human, than they realize; quietly, they set down a transfiguring vision; in their reluctant way, they already constitute an action on the world (Whitman’s determined gerund “compassionating” sees ahead to the mind that enacts these lines).

In a way this moment comprises one of Drummond’s most affecting, because most selfless, self-portraits; the original Portuguese places him just a little more concretely in his contemporaries’ midst—a fellow-traveler whose inner distance allows him, paradoxically, to get nearer to and see more *into* the “present life” to which he commits himself. Readers of this bilingual volume will want to take Zenith’s strong rendering hand in hand with the original. Here is Drummond in words—gentle and forceful, singular and simple—that could only be his own:

Estou preso à vida e olho meus companheiros.
Estão taciturnos mas nutrem grandes esperanças.
Entre eles, considero a enorme realidade.