

I'm Speaking

Rafael Guillen

Sandy McKinney, Translator

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"To be alive is to pause with one foot lifted, / losing a step to gain a second." The poems in this compact volume witness the poignant indecision and ambivalence that characterize the modern sensibility. The poet is from Andalusia, the cultural melting pot that is the southernmost province of Spain, and came of age during the Franco regime. Franco ruled Spain from 1938 through the mid 1960s with draconian policies such as summary execution, detention, torture, internal exile, and absolute censorship. Guillen speaks authoritatively about history, love, loss, and the formation of a self in a world which "makes us insignificant, / as when we were children / and a social call drove us away / from our games at the big table / in the dining room." Guillen explores the ramifications of Ortega y Gasset's dictum that the citizen of the modern age is "condemned to be free," and, in a eloquent reiteration of Existentialist theory, determines that understanding is found, if only temporarily, in "one of those tragic moments / of lucidity that occur in love."

McKinney, who holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College, and whose poems have appeared in journals such as Triquarterly, Pequod, Descant, and Seneca Review, worked closely with Guillen on these translations. Her translations capture the tone of Guillen's work in clear diction and subtle rhythms that elevate speech. Reading McKinney's translations, one believes the voice one hears and finds an ambiguous comfort in the quiet intimacy of these meditations and lamentations. These translations succeed in carrying from one language to another the nuances of emotion and the shadings of thought that clearly mark Guillen's work.

Despite the pathos of loss and history's inexorable negation of the individual, Rafael Guillen's poems are testaments to perseverance and the persistent quest to find meaning through the simple act of creating poems. Guillen continually resists, "in order to go on not sensing / the invented reality you're living. / Maybe / because there's no other way / so human for surviving."

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