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**Lavando La Dirty Laundry by Natalia Treviño** UPDATE

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**Writin' La Vida Loca: Laundry, Poetry, Love**



Ella qué será  
 She's livin' la vida loca  
 Y te dolerá  
 Sí, de verdad te toca

--Ricky Martin

No one should try to climb this  
 Mexican electric fence

--Treviño

The title of Natalia Treviño's collection *Lavando la Dirty Laundry* (Norman, OK: Mongrel Empire Press, 2013) is most surely a direct allusion to Ricky Martin's 1999 pop hit “Livin' la vida loca,” but it also recalls Carlos Drummond de Andrade's series “A vida passada a limpo” or “Life in a clean draft,” first



published in *Poemas* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria José Olympio, 1959).<sup>1</sup> Poetry for Drummond is primarily work on language; it does not purify life but does work beyond its details, heightening and clarifying experience by stripping it down to essences. In the series' title poem the moon illuminates both the bedroom it has entered and an obscure corner of the self, stirring dark residues to bloom and superimposing sky, room, and consciousness in a “shimmer of death that recalls love.”<sup>2</sup> Treviño's cleaning metaphor, on the other hand, does not work toward metaphysical abstraction but embraces instead the detritus of life, the crumbs swept up, and the significance of the stories these may tell. The prose poem “A Lesson in Elements” (38) explains how atoms seek mates to form molecules that join again to form soap. Soap and water make suds, which join dirt in an eager marriage that undermines the contrast between clean and dirty, taking life all together. Love is like that.

These autobiographical poems are stories of the joys and sorrows of women in families – wives, mothers, grandmothers, aunts – on both sides of the border between Texas and Mexico, and of relationships between women as well as with husbands and sons. In the title poem “Lavando la Dirty Laundry,” for instance, the young speaker's grandmother tells her that her grandfather had girlfriends. He once mistook a man who came to tell her this for someone come courting, and threw her pile of clean laundry out into a muddy street. He muddied her, that is to say, and the laundry had to soak for days because rain prevented her from washing soon again. The incident is narrated years later as she prepares to bake a cake, pressing dough into a form, “a metal heart yielding below your fingers” (34), the grandmother loving still, the form responding now to her love. “Well, God” (21-23), the most interesting poem in the book in terms of anecdote, tells of how this grandmother, after one of her sons died in babyhood, adopted

a girl from a beggar woman who was giving her children away:

I will take your girl, you said.

And Raque was yours, Raqueneel.

A girl you named after yourself. (23)

This grandmother is the most clearly drawn character in the collection. The speaker, or author's much more modern loves are implicitly contrasted with hers, and the grandmother's homely wisdom often applies to her as well. The volume takes us from a first marriage to a divorce, to a remarriage, the birth of a child and a husband's cancer treatment, often illustrated with references to Greek mythology, the New Testament, or the folktales gathered by the brothers Grimm. A good marriage is like a carefully prepared sauce, we learn in "It Was the Chef Who Finally Explained" (37); a second marriage is like a stew crafted of disparate ingredients, explains "Second Marriage, Stew" (51-52). In a bad marriage the wife, ignored by her husband and his friends and feeling annihilated psychically, seduces him in such a way as to make sure the friends hear her breathe, hoping this will remind them she is a person ("An Ex Recounts," 5).

Sound and rhythm as well as images of great sensorial impact make the collection lush despite some heavy-handed metaphors:

Before bed, my son told me, You're not you anymore.

"You're like my shoes! When they're tied too tight!"

("The Mother Who Tried," 20)

My serrated, magnetic teeth.

My one volt eye.

("Shock," 54)

Yet my ex would have me ash again,

While I dine on our Phoenix.

(“Forgive Me That My Empirical Self Still Rules,” 72)

There is obvious pleasure in language here but what drives these poems is the content of their narratives and the observant eye of their narrator. Several of the briefer pieces would also be brilliant openings for short stories:

He would spark a joint in the living room

Ask, “Wanna hit?”

He always said he wanted to be good to her.

Share his life. Stuff like that.

(“The Happy Couple,” 3)

Mexico is the volume's ancestral home and some of its most evocative pieces are set there, but Treviño has grown up in English and her literary roots are most clearly located in the conversation poetry<sup>3</sup> or prose lyric<sup>4</sup> of the contemporary United States. Spanish is spoken in the poems but is not used as part of the elaborate systems of code-switching and cultural layering one finds in poets like Lorna Dee Cervantes or Gloria Anzaldúa. Rather, it provides color as local languages often do in the regionalist tradition, and indicates entrance to a rawer world:

I ask this of a language where

the heads of pigs hang above sodas

three houses away. Where newspapers print,

*¡Accidente!*

Above bright photos of half-bodies, twisted, red metal.

Where with this same paper,

they wrap the meat you will eat for lunch.

(“Translating Birth,” 16)

Baudelaire loved artifice and famously said that women were “natural, that is, abominable.”<sup>5</sup> Casey Jenkins' 2013

performance piece “Casting off My Womb” disconcerts because it requires the audience to confront this same discomfort with women's bodies and their connection to creativity, and even with physicality itself.<sup>6</sup> Treviño's work is unrelenting in this way as well. In another poem on birth, the doctors give myriad instructions and the mother-in-law announces egocentric plans. Then perspective shifts so that the mother-child dyad is the subject of a scene that is sentimentalized often enough, but rarely represented from their point of view or revealed as transcendent precisely in its physicality:

Mother and child, all moist air now, all in the quiet  
fog behind a steady rush of the waterfall they formed,  
of flesh  
and blood  
and milk.

(“The Function of Swelling in Pregnancy,” 19)

The discernment of consciousness as physical process is perhaps the most interesting aspect of these poems.

## Notes

1. The translations of Drummond de Andrade given here are mine. Elizabeth Bishop apparently translated this poem as “Life in a New Copy,” in a text I have not been able to see.

2. Orig. “Essa alvura de morte lembra amor.”

3. On conversation poetry see Jonathan Holden, *Style and Authenticity in Postmodern Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), 33-44.

4. On the prose lyric see Stanley Plumly's classic “Chapter and Verse,” *American Poetry Review* 7 (January/February 1978): 21-32.

5. Orig. "La femme est *naturelle*, c'est-à-dire abominable."  
Charles Baudelaire, *Mon coeur mis à nu [My Heart Laid Bare]*,  
1887. <http://www.bmlisieux.com/archives/coeuranu.htm>

6. See Casey Jenkins, "I'm the 'Vaginal Knitting' Performance  
Artist – and I Want to Defend My Work," *The Guardian*, 17  
December 2013.  
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/17/vaginal-knitting-artist-defence>

Reviewed by Leslie Bary

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