



love today emerged ten thousand years ago in the lowlands of what is now Bolivia. It rose to prominence out of a rather sudden demand for soap in nineteenth-century Europe. Concurrent with the rise of industrialism was the appearance of a hygiene movement, and oils to make soap were wanting. Edging out palm oil and other options, the peanut grew in importance, especially from the 1840s forward.

Lewis's story continues, not in the Americas, but in the westernmost parts of Africa, which are now called Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Sierra Leone. *Slaves for Peanuts* is mainly set in the 1880s, with France as the region's dominant colonial power. Peanuts had become a popular European import, less so in the US, where it had racist associations—as in only fit for Black people and, relatedly, the pejorative “working for peanuts.”

The book focuses on slavery throughout, and Lewis does a fine job of showing its variety, its ubiquity, and its persistence in West Africa as well as the variety of peanuts, with their many names in different regional locales. Some helpful maps are included for easy reference.

A good part of the narrative spotlights a few key individuals, especially the Protestant evangelist from Sierra Leone, Charles Taylor. The ups and downs of his career,

including the ambiguities or aporias of his role as civilizer, play a pivotal role. He was indigenous and antislavery but also pulled toward European cultural norms. Native leader Lat Joor, schoolteacher Salimata Ndiaye, and French missionary Francisco Villager are among other figures whose impacts serve to flesh out *Slaves for Peanuts's* main themes.

Peanut agriculture was certainly important for West Africa, but Jori Lewis's book deals more with slavery. There were islands of relative freedom or self-determination in cities like Freetown and Bethesda, and the colonial power, France, had to some extent abolished slavery as of 1848. But the plight and challenges of the newly freed were considerable.

In Charles Taylor, the book's central figure, one recognizes the familiar pull of assimilation. Development, both physical (e.g., railroad expansion) and cultural, was resisted, with mixed results. Colonization brought inroads by civilization in general. And, somewhat ironically, European powers gained ground behind antislavery as a humanitarian rationale or foil. Using the antislavery stance, they were able to gain new Indigenous allies and further their control.

Jori Lewis conducted research in the archives of several countries and has given us a rich and very readable overview of people and peanuts in nineteenth-century West Africa.

John Zerzan
Eugene, Oregon

Mohamed Metwalli
A Song by the Aegean Sea:
A Book of Poetry

Trans. Gretchen McCullough & Mohamed Metwalli. New York. Egret Chapbooks. 2022. 54 pages.

IT IS RARE THAT a cover captures the essence of a poetry collection as well as does the photograph adorning the front cover of Mohamed Metwalli's newest collection, first published in Arabic in 2015 (see *WLT*, May 2018, 26). The gentle, almost impercepti-

ble coloring of the image shows the poet's smiling face balancing his humor with the wistfulness of a writer who reaches out to grab images that capture vanishing yet vital moments. Equally importantly, it places the poet in what appears to be a seaside café in the sunshine of the Aegean. This location is what makes this particular collection so different for this poet, who is based in the megacity of Cairo. While never appearing directly in this book, the noise and chaotic intensity of the poet's urban home provides the unspoken contrast that allows him to write with the clarity and dexterity of his Aegean retreat.

What stands out about this poetry collection is the way it is so complete; not just in the way it represents the visions of a poet-visitor exploring a single new location but also in the way specific images and sensations are revisited throughout the poems. This is not a selection of poems brought together because it is time for the writer to bring out a new volume. It is like a song cycle that, while changing forms, is always very much in the writer's voice and has one constant linking theme.

In his poems, Metwalli employs long trailing sentences that can meander delicately around the beauty and sordidness of a place to create a vision that is like a collection of fading Polaroids, capturing the reality of moments that are at once



both intense and fleeting. These long sentence structures work so well in Arabic but can be a nightmare to a translator. Here, the careful process of the translator working together with the poet has resulted in poems that are accessible yet intense, encouraging the reader to quickly revisit the poems to see how and why Metwalli reuses the images like feral dogs, larks and ravens, and the occasional scorpion fish across the collection. The short translator's introduction by McCullough is useful to readers who are new to Metwalli's work, and it also sheds light on her process of translating a poet who is so international in his reference points.

What I find particularly effective in these poems (which has always been the case in Metwalli's work) are the changes of focus onto different parts of the visions he selects. In this collection, it can be a swift move from the vast seascapes of the Aegean to the minutiae of seafront detritus such as scraps of paper or pieces of leftover chicken:

Like stars in the distance
 And a full moon behind four drunks
 Just out of "Deniz Restaurant"
 —Which rip tourists off in broad
 daylight—
 Crooning a song from the seventies
 Aiming their throats towards the dark
 sea;
 No waves in the bay of Izmir
 Just a few lampposts
 A few fat dogs and garbage men
 One single reaction
 Was a licentious female giggle
 In a nearby room . . .

This contrast of constantly moving foci so clearly reflects that sensation one gets when feeling so very much alive in a place but then realizing that in the lifespan of a historical town like Izmir, you are not even as significant as the scraps of food that the gulls fly down to consume. Metwalli's poems allow the reader to embrace this glorious experience of ephemeral humanity or, as he puts it, "our shelf life."

While mainly about the experiences of contemporary Izmir, some of the poems explore the place's complex past, which helps ground the collection in its geographical and historical location. Despite this, there is also a sense that this could be any Mediterranean coastal city and from any time. In this collection we see a writer embracing the lighter side of Mediterranean decadence to view the humanity among the tourists, fishermen, and sex workers who inhabit the seafront. In the style and focus of his poetry, Metwalli is a poet toasting fellow writers who have found respite on the shores of the Mediterranean through the ages from the intensity and mercilessness of their regular urban life.

Richard Woffenden
 Leeds, UK

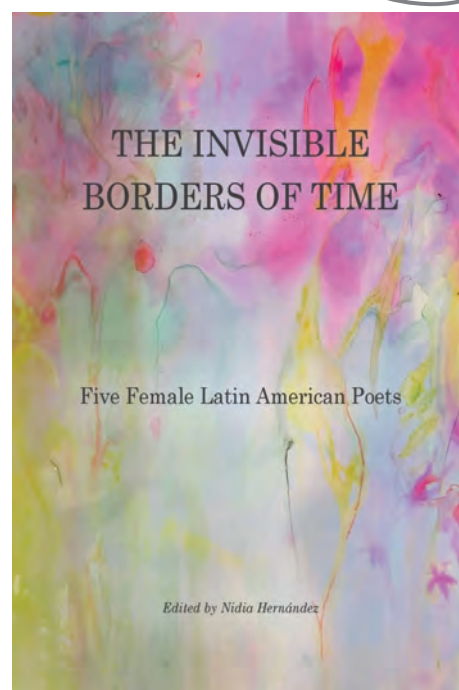
*The Invisible Borders of Time:
 Five Female Latin American
 Poets*

Ed. Nidia Hernández
 Medford, Massachusetts. Arrowsmith
 Press. 2022. 174 pages.

THE INVISIBLE BORDERS OF TIME is a bilingual compilation of poems by five highly regarded female Latin American poets: Cristina Peri Rossi (Uruguay), Piedad Bonnett (Colombia), Yolanda Pantin (Venezuela), Carmen Boullosa (Mexico), and Rossella Di Paolo (Peru).

Cristina Peri Rossi is known for her erotic poetics that explore not only the physicality of love but also music and blues that blend the idealization of the body with an exploration of perfect love with its attendant longing and loss. "Blanca / White" is an homage to the female body where the language of poetics is used as a construct of the body's secret pleasures. "Deseo / Desire" weaves together the blues of Tom Waits with the city's labyrinths and the elusive presence of women once loved and longed for.

Piedad Bonnett's background in philosophy is evident in her phenomenological approach to poetics, where she constructs paradoxical juxtapositions with similes that



make the ordinary fresh and new: in "Del Reino de Este Mundo / The Kingdom of This World," "breasts are firm and sweet like a pair of windows full of light." Her poems are wryly humorous: in "Miserable Men Make Terrible Dance Partners," "no woman can be more / lonely, more miserably lonely, than she / who wishes to love a miserable man" (see *WLT*, Jan. 2022, 15).

Yolanda Pantin alternates between dense tone poems of prose and an open minimalism to create a contemplative canvas. Nowhere is this more apparent than in "Notes for a Poetics (Version II, against myself)." References to paintings, filmmakers (Tarkovsky), and writers construct a frame for introspective passages flowing from juxtapositions: her sister, secrets, outrageous ambition, the island of Margarita.

Oblivion and the indeterminate give Carmen Boullosa's poetry a haunting quality, even as her metaphors are tactile and immediate. She describes night as a "strange petal that falls like winged rust" in one poem, and then in another, night is a "peaceful skein of sound." In both "Memoria Vacía / Empty Memory" and "El Hilo Olvida / The Thread Forgets," the world becomes a mosaic textured with the people, sounds, and landscape of everyday