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The Peony's Hidden Message

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BOOK OF THE PEONY

Gaspar Orozco
Shearsman Books
<https://www.shearsman.com/>
96 Pages; Print, \$18.00

"Immortality begins in the eye" of Gaspar Orozco's peony. His budding, petaling, and wilting flower is also a skull, a city, and a world where fire, water, and air interact with petal-like closeness.

This series of prose poems is an oblique history of world cultures in troubled times and a plea for a return to beauty. The opening page tells readers, "The first page of the book of the peony is lost." Sentences later, the first page is "still to be written." The double paradox of reading a page that is neither the lost first page nor yet written requests each reader to enter the mystery and the impossibility of seeing deeply into any flower's lifespan and, in particular, the peony. It serves as a showy, evanescent, and liminal metaphor for itself as well as for the transitory nature of empires, thoughts, and dreams.

The bilingual edition has facing short Spanish to English prose poems, one to each page, with about 41 pieces in two sections. Each page offers its own layers of symbols. Gaspar Orozco's bio as a career diplomat born in Chihuahua, Mexico in 1971 and based in San Diego is balanced by his credits as a member of a 1990s punk rock band and co-director of a 2011 documentary film *Subterraneans: Mexican Nortena Music in New York*.

His bio in part prepares readers for the international scope of *Book of the Peony*. Part 1, verse 16 is a poetic interpretation of Cai Guo Qiang's art from fire, which starts with blank paper, an idea, and chemicals activated like fireworks. Orozco likens the artist's process to how ideas burst forth from the mind and leave a message "in the silent scorch mark that's been left behind."

Part 2 opens with an undated quote from Vasko Popa:

The red peony's flame
dries the raven's blood-drenched wings.

Its significance is not fully clear upon first or second reading. Vasko Popa lived from 1922-1991 in Belgrade and wrote this in the Serbian language in the early 1950s. According to Christopher Merrill's *Only the Nails Remain: Scenes from the Balkan Wars*—based upon research and first hand experience in the region, this quote refers to Popa's series of poems about Blackbird's Field—its white peonies were stained red by the blood of fallen Serbian fighters in the battle for Kosovo. Merrill, quoting Popa's translator Charles Simic and critic Svetozar Koljević, points out that the Serbs still honor their own defeat here in the Turkish-Ottoman wars of 1389. So Blackbird's Field and red peonies symbolize 500 years of Turkish occupation at the time Popa wrote the poem. It seems likely, but is impossible for me to know, that Orozco is aware that Milosevic used Popa's poems to stir Serbians into the Serbo-Croatian war of ethnic cleansing (1991-94) that started with a speech in Blackbird's Field in 1989. If so, the Orozco poem that follows may refer to holocausts past, present, and future. Another possibility is that Orozco has changed the quote slightly, making the peony a healing force.

This slender quote—originally about ongoing blood feuds—sheds light on the peony's further symbolisms in the Orozco prose poem that opens part 2:

Red enveloped in a reddish light. Facing me, only half the peony. The other half hidden in the impenetrable obsidian of this nocturnal return. Thus, half-open, the divided flower invited me to detach the flame from its flame. And I didn't do it, mortally wounded by the kind of weariness that had separated me from that apparition. I asked myself, of course, what fire would burn in the invisible part of the flower. What letter of fate would have been inscribed in that zone forbidden me. What part of me would have been boiled away in that aroma, in that unreachable dampness? Like being at the gates of a city impenetrable in the beauty of its semidarkness, but that now you would have no interest in entering, because you know that there's nothing there.

Here I merely note the red and black: colors of the final dream.

I may never fully grasp all of Orozco's meanings, yet what jumps forward is his picture of a hopelessly divided state. Is he talking about divisions between rich and poor? Between ethnic rivals? About Stendahl's *The Red and the Black* symbolizing the battle between clergy and state? Orozco's images conjure the poetry of Octavio Paz championing the oppressed and Garcia Márquez's harrowing powerhouse memoir *Living to Tell the Tale*. Is he addressing America's, Mexico's, or the world's divisions? Is this passage an abstract portrait of Mexico as an exquisite blossom that is being

Reading Book of the Peony turns out to be an international journey.

kept in darkness or even destroyed due to poverty, ignorance, crime, and greed? The peony becomes a primal symbol for evanescent beauty soon to be extinguished. The narrator cannot see the flower in the dark. The last lines of this passage foreshadow the last two sentences in this book: "You call it peony. I call it emptiness."

It's significant that Orozco contrasts "empty" or "vacía" or "vacío"—a leitmotif in several passages—with his use of "nothing" or "nada." Emptiness may refer to the zen notion of mindful consciousness of each moment. Some philosophies prize emptiness as a high state leading to enlightenment, a state that allows a soul to exist purely in the present with no extraneous thoughts or emotions. When the peony seems "empty" or transparent in the end, this suggests the sensation of being at one with the universe.

In contrast with "emptiness," when the narrator says, toward the end of the same passage, "...there's nothing there," "nothing" suggests that the narrator retreats rather than face the unknown woes and foes of "Red enveloped in a reddish light." Cruelties he suspects cause him to avoid "that zone forbidden to me." The poet suggests humans evade looking deeply into war and other immensities—all of the human, plant, and animal lives that are extinguished every minute, hour, and day.

Part 2, verse 4 retells a Hokusai parable: the butterfly is unable to reach the flower because the "empire of the wind"—a larger force—keeps them apart. The narrator calls this the "mechanism of fate." I cannot tell whether Orozco believes in fate or whether he questions its use as an excuse to control smaller creatures.

The peony's color is sometimes stated and sometimes not. In part 2, verse 5, the flower is black.



Book of the Peony
Gaspar Orozco
translated by Mark Weiss

It is:

the only image rerun on the blind television. Its diagram burns on the smoky mirrors of the leprosarium, on the x-ray of the inferno that hides in your entrails, on the garden tattooed on the corpse's fingers.

The vignette's closing image is "the aftermath of lightning." Its densely packed metaphors picture the black flower and the garden as small flat token images amid an inferno of war, disease, and death.

However, all is not yet lost. In part 2, verse 11, the poet takes us to the Empty Gate. He sites Bai Juyi, a Buddhist monk Wang, and a handful of petals gathered from the soil of the Empty Gate. He has found unfathomable beauty, yet he sees his own disintegration. We learn that this flower (life?) is an "endless enigma" that has been mulled over for centuries without resolution. Here "empty" may mean no gate.

In verse 14, there is a peony cage made from red wood in 1725 to hold a fighting cricket that would never be permitted to leave, and "... all those who have ever been a prisoner of the flower may live forever."

Reading Book of the Peony turns out to be an international journey. Every page juxtaposes light and unexpected symbols; the book's cover shines with a pale pink iridescent ink and color on silk *Blossoming Peony* by an anonymous ancient artist.

This is the third Orozco book translated by Mark Weiss, who is also editor of two poetry anthologies and his own poetry book. The language is exciting and seems congruent with the original.

Reading this book has opened my eyes, too, to Manet's peony painting at The Metropolitan Museum and Inka Essenhigh's peony paintings at the Miles McEnery Gallery in Chelsea. By coincidence, I've been watching my own vase of blood red peonies turn from tight fists into bursts of color with white centers. The petals shed gradually or all at once spear-like inner petals fall away rapidly, especially in the dark. I appreciate the exchanges this book has inspired and its cautionary world's-eye-view.

Jan Garden Castro's website is www.jancastro.com. Her books include *The Last Frontier* (2001) and *The Art & Life of Georgia O'Keeffe* (1985) and Sonia Delaunay: *La Moderne* (2002). She co-edited anthologies on Margaret Atwood and *St. Louis Literature*. Her poems have appeared in *New Letters*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Roof*, and *Chronogram*.