

WHERE
POEMS HORIZONS GO
BY RHINA P. ESPAILLAT



NEW ODYSSEY PRESS
KIRKSVILLE, MISSOURI

First New Odyssey edition published 1998
Copyright © 1998 Thomas Jefferson University Press
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

Author photo by Brian Gonye

Cover illustration is *Woman reading a letter at an open window* by Jan Vermeer,
reproduced by permission of Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

03 02 01 00 99 5 4 3 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Espaillet, Rhina P. (Rhina Polonia), 1932-

Where horizons go : poems / by Rhina P. Espaillet.—1st New Odyssey ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-943549-55-8 (alk. paper). — ISBN 0-943549-56-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Title

PS3555.S535W48 1998

811'.54—dc21

98-23273
CIP

New Odyssey Press is an imprint of Truman State University Press at Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri 63501 (<http://www2.truman.edu/tjup>).

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any format by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

The paper in this publication meets or exceeds the minimum requirements of the American National Standard—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48 (1984).

*To the members of the Powow River Poets,
with my thanks for their encouragement and good company,
and most especially to Len Krisak,
who devoted a great deal of intelligent attention to the manuscript.
This book would not have been possible without his insight, his honesty,
or his patience.*

CONTENTS

If You Ask Me, 1
Current, 2
Barker, 3
Almost, 4
In Absentia, 5
Map Lesson, 6
Calendar, 7
January, 8
Haiku, 9
Ash Wednesday, 10
Children Blowing Bubbles, 11
Solstice, 12
Man Raking Leaves, 13
November, 14
Driving Through It, 15
Last Day, 16
Quandary, 17
Bra, 18
The Quetzal, 19
Divination, 20
Lunar Module, 21
Falling, 22
Six of One, 23
Neighbors, 24
Checking It Twice, 25
Song, 26
Agua, 27

By Morning,	28
For Evan, Who Says I Am Too Tidy,	29
Para Mi Tataranieto El Astropionero,	30
For My Great-Great Grandson the Space Pioneer,	31
Review,	32
Bread,	34
Done with Mirrors,	35
Voyeur,	36
Rainy Sunday,	37
Roach,	38
Reservation,	39
The Prodigal Son Goes over Notes for His Memoirs,	40
Swinging an Arc Before Him As He Goes,	41
Gravida,	42
Weighing In,	43
Interlude,	44
How It Begins,	45
Rachmaninoff on the Mass Pike,	46
Subsistence,	47
Sixty-Five,	48
Brown,	49
Sequel,	50
Sacrament,	51
Occupational Hazard,	52
Invocation,	53
Interview with a Poltergeist,	55
Reading Vermeer,	56
Parallax,	57
Class Notes,	58
Bilingual/Bilingüe,	60
Poetry Reading,	61
For the Friend Who Guided Me Home from a Poetry Reading, through Traffic, on Unfamiliar Roads,	62
“Why Publish?,”	64
Afterword, “Bilingual/Bilingüe,”	65

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MY THANKS to the following publications, where several of the poems in this manuscript first appeared or are scheduled to appear:

America for “Weighing In,” *Blue Unicorn* for “The Quetzal,” *Caprice* for “Six of One,” *Defined Providence* for “Driving Through It” and “Song,” *Eagle-Tribune* for “For My Great-Great Grandson the Space Pioneer,” *The Formalist* for “Almost,” *Hellas* for “January,” *The Lyric* for “Falling” and “In Absentia,” *Medicinal Purposes* for “Neighbors,” “Poetry Reading,” and “If You Ask Me,” *Northeast* for “Bilingual/Bilingüe,” *Orbis*, U.K., for “Map Lesson” and “Roach,” *Pivot* for “Parallax” and “Why Publish?,” *Poetry* for “Last Day,” *Poetry Digest* for “Bread” and “For Evan, Who Says I Am Too Tidy,” *Poetry NY* for “Map Lesson,” *Sparrow* for “Calendar,” “Gravida,” and “Quandary,” *The Tennessee Review* for “Ash Wednesday” and “The Prodigal Son Goes Over Notes for His Memoirs,” and *Voices International* for “Rainy Sunday.”

Several of the poems in this manuscript have won recent awards:

“Children Blowing Bubbles” and “Sacrament” received the 1996 Annual Award from *The Plum Review*; “Map Lesson” and “Roach” received awards from *Orbis* magazine in 1996; “Almost” was one of eleven finalists in the 1996 Howard Nemerov Sonnet Contest.

Bilingual/Bilingüe

RECENT INTEREST in the phenomenon known as “Spanglish” has led me to reexamine my own experience as a writer who works chiefly in her second language, and especially to recall my father’s inflexible rule against the mixing of languages. In fact, no English was allowed in that midtown Manhattan apartment that became home after my arrival in New York in 1939. My father read the daily paper in English, taught himself to follow disturbing events in Europe through the medium of English-language radio, and even taught me to read the daily comic strips, in an effort to speed my learning of the language he knew I would need. But that necessary language was banished from family conversation: it was the medium of the outer world, beyond the door; inside, among ourselves, only Spanish was permitted, and it had to be pure, grammatical, unadulterated Spanish.

At the age of seven, however, nothing seems more important than communicating with classmates and neighborhood children. For my mother, too, the new language was a way out of isolation, a means to deal with the larger world and with those American women for whom she sewed. But my father, a political exile waiting for changes in our native country, had different priorities: he lived in the hope of return, and believed that the new home, the new speech, were temporary. His theory was simple: if it could be said at all, it could be said best in the language of those authors whose words were the core of his education. But his insistence on pure Spanish made it difficult, sometimes impossible, to bring home and share the jokes of friends, puns, pop lyrics, and other staples of seven-year-old conversation. Table talk sometimes ended with tears or sullen silence.

And yet, despite the friction it caused from time to time, my native language was also a source of comfort—the reading that I loved, intimacy within the family, and a peculiar auditory delight best described as echoes in the mind. I learned early to relish words

as counters in a game that could turn suddenly serious without losing the quality of play, and to value their sound as a meaning behind their meaning.

Nostalgia, a confusion of identity, the fear that if the native language is lost the self will somehow be altered forever: all are part of the subtle flavor of immigrant life, as well as the awareness that one owes gratitude to strangers for acts of communication that used to be simple and once imposed no such debt.

Memory, folklore, and food all become part of the receding landscape that language sets out to preserve. Guilt, too, adds to the mix, the suspicion that to love the second language too much is to betray those ancestors who spoke the first and could not communicate with us in the vocabulary of our education, our new thoughts. And finally, a sense of grievance and loss may spur hostility toward the new language and those who speak it, as if the common speech of the perceived majority could weld together a disparate population into a huge, monolithic, and threatening Other. That Other is then assigned traits and habits that preclude sympathy and mold “Us” into a unity whose cohesiveness gives comfort.

Luckily, there is another side to bilingualism: curiosity about the Other may be as natural and pervasive as group loyalty. If it weren’t, travel, foreign residence, and intermarriage would be less common than they are. For some bilingual writers, the Other—and the language he speaks—are appealing. Some acknowledge and celebrate the tendency of languages to borrow from each other and produce something different in the process. That is, in part, the tendency that has given rise to “Spanglish.”

It’s dangerous, however, to accept the inevitable melding of languages over time as a justification for speaking, in the short run, a mix that impoverishes both languages by allowing words in one to drive out perfectly good equivalent words in the other. The habitual speaker of such a mix ends by speaking not two, or even one complete language, but fragments of two that are no longer capable of standing alone or serving the speaker well with any larger audience. As a literary device with limited appeal and durability, “Spanglish,” like other such blends, is expressive and fresh. But as a substitute for genuine bilinguality—the cultivation and preservation of two languages—I suspect it represents a danger to the advancement of foreign speakers, and a loss to both cultures. My father sensed as much

in 1939, and stubbornly preserved my native language for me, through his insistence that I be truly bilingual rather than a traveler across boundaries that “Spanglish” has made all too permeable.

My father, who never learned to think in English, was persuaded that the words of his own language were the “true” names for things in the world. But for me that link between fact and word was broken, as it is for many who grow up bilingual. Having been taught to love words and take them seriously as reflections of reality, I felt it a loss to learn that, in fact, words are arbitrary, man-made, no more permanent than clothing: somewhere under all of them reality is naked.

Disconcerting as it is, however, to lose the security of words that are perceived as single keys to what they unlock, it is also exhilarating to see oneself as the maker of those words, even if they are now impermanent, provisional artifacts that have value for us only because they’re ours. Anybody who has ever gone hunting for that one right and elusive word knows what bilingualism feels like, even if he’s never left his native country or learned a word in any language but his own. There is a sense in which every poet is bilingual, and those of us who are more overtly so are only living metaphors for the condition that applies to us all. We use a language that seems deceptively like the language of the people around us, but isn’t quite. The words are the same, but the weight we give them, the connections we find among them, the criteria we use to choose this one rather than that one, are our own.

At a recent poetry reading I closed with a poem in Spanish, and a member of the English-speaking audience approached me afterward to remark how moved she had been by that poem, and how she wished I had read others.

“Where did you learn Spanish?” I asked.

“I don’t speak any Spanish,” she replied. “What I understood was the music of what you read.”

It occurred to me, during our subsequent conversation, that poetry may be precisely what is almost lost, not in translation, but in the wording, the transit from experience to paper. If we succeed in salvaging anything, maybe it is most often in the music, the formal elements of poetry that do travel from language to language, as the formal music of classic Spanish poetry my father loved followed

Afterword

me into English and draws me, to this day, to poems that are patterned and rich and playful.

It's occurred to me since that conversation that a poem in Spanish may have more in common with a poem in English—or any other language—than with a grocery list, say, or a piece of technical writing that happens to use Spanish words. There is something in poetry that transcends specific language, that makes it possible for transplanted people like me to recognize the songs of the Other as his own even before he understands them fully. Poetry may be used to draw very small circles around itself, identifying its speaker as a member of a narrowly delineated group and looking at “outsiders” with eyes that discern less and less detail as distance increases. But it may also be used to draw very large circles, circles that will draw in rather than exclude, as in Edwin Markham's apt four-line metaphor titled “Outwitted”:

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that shut him in.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BORN IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC in 1932, Rhina P. Espaillat has lived in the U.S. since 1939 and writes chiefly in English, but occasionally also in her native Spanish. Her work appears frequently in anthologies and magazines; she has won numerous awards, most recently from *Sparrow*, *Blue Unicorn* and *Medicinal Purposes*, as well as several from *Orbis*, The World Order of Narrative and Formalist Poets, and The Poetry Society of America.