
“Madrid”

Poem by John Liddy Translated into Spanish

Beatriz Villacañas (Introduction)
Germán Asensio Peral (Translation)

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John Liddy

John Liddy (1954) was born and educated in Ireland, took a degree with the University of Wales but has lived in Madrid since 1982, where he worked both as a librarian and teacher at the British Council. His long list of collections of poems include *Boundaries* (1974), *The Angling Cot* (1991), *Song of the Empty Cage* (1997), *Wine and Hope* (1999), *Cast-a-Net* (2003), *The Well: New and Selected Poems* (2007), *Gleanings* (2010) and, more recently, *The Secret Heart of Things* (2014). A book of stories for children, *Cuentos cortos en inglés*, was published in 2011 and is now on its sixth edition. He also founded and co-directed, along with Jim Burke, the journal *The Stony Thursday Book*.

John Liddy is living proof that literature shies away from any kind of boundary. Irish-born but adopted into the heart of Spain, the question of nationality in his poetry is imbued with its purest traditional and historical senses; that is, the merging together of human and land and the healthiness of an unoffending political discourse. His pioneering bi-national poetry stands as a lucid example of cultural blending. Liddy harbours the essence of two countries and amasses the national riches of both, multiplying but never subduing. His words, in that they are written in one language or the other, are national but the underlying message is unequivocally universal.

Liddy, in the vein of many renowned Irish writers, left Ireland to live abroad, the better to understand the country, his poetry, himself and different realities such as the Spanish. From both a physical and psychological distance, Liddy meets his native country again through a poetry which evinces a rich life cycle, forged in the fires of self-exile and homecoming. Indeed, living in Spain does not separate Liddy from Ireland; quite the opposite, the fertility and vivacity of Ireland’s present and the dramatic undertones of its past surface fearlessly in most of his best poetry.

Liddy’s poetry does not imply distance; rather, it simulates a round trip with a suitcase full of new landscapes. He has ensconced himself, both personally and professionally, in Spain. He is an integral part of Spanish life and the other way around: poems such as “Madrid through the Eyes of a Stranger” or “The Knife Sharpener of Madrid” evidence this mutual relationship. His poetic voice, endowed with travelling qualities, does not only interconnect Ireland and Spain; Liddy’s poetry timetravels and brings together past and history into the present of our lives. The present drinks avidly from memories of times past and the tragic history of Ireland, still latent in the hearts of the people—instead of undermining them—fills

Liddy and the Irish with vital and creative energies. Liddy is a poet whose commitment to past and present realities emanates empathy towards friends, children, strangers and people who suffer or are undergoing painful circumstances, as the last lines of “Blues piece” show: “But, Sheila, remember this:/We are all uneasy/ In our skin”.

His commitment also extends to reconciliation, to burying ancient hatred, to prioritising peace. As an Irishman, he has been close to the divisions between Northern and Southern Ireland and the ceaseless troubles in Ulster; one of his poems, “The Bodhrán and the Lambeg drum” invokes the good friend from the North so that both of them can drum together to an equal symphony. This poem means the convergence of history and present, symbol and reality: the *Bodhrán* is a typical Irish drum and John, through this poem-song—or, rather, a song whose lyric is the poem itself—invites the other northern Irishman to bring along his Lambeg drum, a bulky drum that the Northern Irish play, sometimes threateningly, at the Orangist parades in Portadown: “*Ven a tocar conmigo on the common kitchen ground, en el terreno común de la cocina*”. The poet asks them to drink a toast to King Billy and Brian Boru, that is, two symbols of the two Irelands; moreover, the chorus of the poem-song features the colour green (Catholic Ireland) and orange (Protestant Ireland). “The Last House in Connaught”, a particularly moving poem, tells a profound and pure-hearted story which, as good stories do, flies uneasily towards the future.

We are honoured to present his exciting new poem, *Madrid*, previously unpublished, to the expanding community of scholars, students and readers of modern Irish writing.

Beatriz Villacañas

MADRID FRAGMENTS

para Miguel Ortega

“Fui sobre agua edificada, mis muros de fuego son.” Alberto Corazón

No longer a stranger to your idiosyncrasies,
I set out on the shady side of summer and drank
horchata, that golden Arab girl of the chufa,
to discover the sum of your soul, the improbable
search at the marble counter of a Rastro bar
where a woman worse for wear nodded off
on a high stool, a high-heeled shoe dangling
from a night walker’s foot, bare legs the objects
of lingering eyes before a sudden thud on the floor
jolted her awake and no prince rushed to the rescue
as she slowly shod herself and left the clientele
with a weary smile, to contemplate the residue.

So much residue of the past on display:
The history of a country encapsulated in statues.
Royal flushes of monarchic dynasties, Roman,
Greek busts, artists, philosophers and poets,
founding fathers of a squashed Republic, post Civil
War composers and doctors, discoverers of new
lands populated by natives, Irish, English, German
street names, early settlers in Jewish and Moorish
quarters, the conquered and the vanquished –
all accompanied me on my tentative wanderings
through Répide’s trellised maze, making my way
with no map to halt my gaze.

Conocedor ya de tus peculiaridades,
marché por donde cae la sombra del estío y bebí
horchata, esa áurea niña árabe de la chufa,
para descubrir el todo de tu alma, una búsqueda
remota en la barra de mármol de un bar del Rastro
donde una mujer maltrecha daba cabezadas
en un taburete alto, zapato de tacón que pendía
de la transeúnte nocturna, sus piernas desnudas objeto
de obstinados ojos antes de que un repentino batacazo
la despertase de golpe, sin un príncipe que acudiese a su rescate,
mientras se calzaba parsimoniosa y abandonaba la clientela
con una sonrisa fatigosa, para contemplar los despojos.

Tanto despojo del pasado a plena vista:
la historia de un país encerrada en estatuas.
Escalera real de dinastías monárquicas, bustos
romanos y griegos, artistas, filósofos, poetas,
padres fundadores de una República aplastada, compositores
y doctores de posguerra, colonizadores de nuevas
tierras habitadas por indígenas, nombres de calles
irlandeses, ingleses, alemanes, los primeros colonos
de barriadas judías y moriscas, los conquistados y los derrotados –
me acompañaron todos en mis titubeantes expediciones
por el laberinto emparrado de Répide, abriéndome paso
sin un mapa que molestase a mi mirada.

No map to distract my roving eye, I marveled at Chicarro's rooftops, an earthy provincialism in the city's canopy, for all of Spain dwells here in manner, speech and accent, food and music, a tribal presence in song and language, their unapologetic claims on what it means to be Spanish in Castile, a nationalism played out in football stadiums, the pride of one's place more strongly felt in the Capital's *barrios* where Cybele vies with Neptune and defeat for either side like a Viking falling on his sword, a mattress maker lying alone on a bed of stones.

Alone but not lonely, I walked your arteries observing the ordinary and the phenomenal in your distinctive pulse and underground smell – necessary knowledge in a blind man's arsenal; each footstep a revelation in the doorways of bodegas, herbal shops and municipal markets that sold fish caught off the coast of my childhood – necessary connections to sustain me until I found a rhythm to your noise and intricacies, became accustomed but not indifferent to your cardboard lairs in plazas and flyovers, your trickles of piss snaking along the arches and parapets.

Within the arches of the seven standing gates I beheld your walking maimed: the one-legged cripple thin as a twig, the beggar dragging his body along a footpath, the pickpocket on the 61 bus and José Hierro less than eager enroute to La Princesa, while Marcos Ana's loveless prison poem screamed from behind the placards and Muelle's haversack bulged with canisters for a derelict wall in need of a mural as you readied yourself for protest and all that perceptible sorrow in a young woman's eyes after a quarrel, the inconsolable tear falling to the ground, which only you can comprehend.

So much to decipher in the whisperings from the Palacio Lináres: the meaning of bat ears, cat whiskers and rabbit teeth above the bullet ridden columns of the Puerta de Alcalá – a right-of-way for the migration of sheep, a severed head of unrequited love on Soldier street, Hemingway departing the Hotel Suecia and two slave-lions pulling Cybele towards the Gran Vía where the bull of my childhood was slain by Fortuna, the bullfighter's own sword, as Pedro Chicote strolled the boulevard with Ava, Lana and Rita for a nightcap in the Hilton after a sunset of incandescent reflection.

Sin un mapa que distrajese a mi ojo errante, me dejé maravillarse por los tejados de Chicarro, la ruralidad más terrenal en la bóveda de la ciudad, pues España entera dormita aquí con sus costumbres, habla y acento, comida y música, entes primitivos su canto y su lenguaje, sus argumentos más altivos de lo que significa ser español en Castilla, un nacionalismo que se agranda en estadios de fútbol, el orgullo del lugar más sentido en los *barrios* de la Capital donde Cibeles contiene con Neptuno y ninguno alcanza la victoria, como un vikingo que se empala en su espada, un fabricante de colchones que yace solo en una cama de piedras.

Solo pero no solitario, anduve por tus arterias observando lo ordinario y lo fenomenal en ese singular pulso tuyo y olor subterráneo – saberes necesarios en el arsenal de un hombre ciego; cada paso una revelación a las puertas de las bodegas, herbolarios y mercados municipales donde se vende pescado capturado en la costa de mi niñez – forzosas conexiones a las que agarrarme hasta que di con un ritmo para tu ruido y entresijos y me acostumbré aunque no sin indiferencia a tus refugios de cartón en plazas y pasos a nivel, a tus arroyos de orina que serpentean entre los arcos y parapetos.

Bajo los arcos de las siete puertas fui testigo de tu lisiado paso: el tullido de una pierna delgado como una rama, el mendigo que arrastra su cuerpo por una acera, el carterista del autobús 61 y José Hierro, poco menos que ansioso, camino a La Princesa, mientras el desolado poema de prisión de Marcos Ana gritaba tras las pancartas y el macuto de Muelle repleto de latas para una pared en ruinas pendiente de un mural mientras te preparabas para las protestas y toda esa pena patente en los ojos de una joven tras una discusión, la lágrima desconsolada que empapa el suelo y que solo tú puedes comprender.

Tanto que descifrar en los susurros del Palacio de Linares, el significado de las orejas de murciélago, bigotes de gato y dientes de conejo que coronan las columnas tejidas a balas de la Puerta de Alcalá – preferencia de paso para la trashumancia de ovejas, una cabeza decapitada de amor no correspondido en calle del Soldado, Hemingway dejando el Hotel Suecia y dos leones esclavizados que arrastran a Cibeles hacia la Gran Vía, donde Fortuna mató al toro de mi niñez, el propio estoque del torero, mientras Pedro Chicote deambulaba por el bulvar con Ava, Lana y Rita, de copas al Hilton tras una puesta de sol de reflejos incandescentes.

In the all-seeing mirror I spied a banquet on its way out of Llardy's to a conman in the city jail as I travelled back in time from Serrano to Sol on a mule-tram, dined with Paco the Dog in Café Fornos, ambled with Galdós and Valle-Inclán past the tintinnabulation of Goya's musical mannequins chiming for two parliamentary lions made of melted-down cannons – a gift from O'Donnell to a fledgling state, a sign that read *Nosce te ipsum* which I carried in my head like a hankering for other times that served to remind me that I walked where others had been; kindred spirits, sufi performers balancing on thin air.

Where was the air for the frenzy of sparrows trapped in the belly of the bronze horse in the Plaza Mayor?, the bones of Cervantes in a convent on Lope de Vega, signifying another O'Donnell and Velazquez reputed to be under the asphalt? O King of small Squares, Napoleon's brother, help me to unravel the mystery of a calf's head dripping blood from under a murderer's coat, autos-de-fé in the plazas near convents full of saintly vials; below zero in my bones on knife-grinder street where Luis Candelas, the bandit, picked his prey and Calderon de la Barca's house

Saved from destruction not far from where virginal Paloma is still revered by unexpectant women; where Galileo designed a statue and socialists gathered around marble tables in a bar off Sol to right the wrongs of the right who wrote their anthem downstairs in Café Leon now The James Joyce near my half-way house on Alcalá where I listened to Van's lush trees swaying on Cypress Avenue, observed the Centre of Arab Learning with its paintings of boat people by Matug Aborawi, their quest for a better life at the bottom of the sea.

From six hundred meters above sea level, I imagined the splash of surf, the cliff's immaculate gull, all that I had left behind for you: an itinerant teacher who flogged verbs instead of trinkets in the vicinity of Fleming's statue, savior of the gored, where the hero is shouldered out the gate by a delirious crowd, where the philanthropic Duke received me for a *penultima* in Silma before the glad key turned on home and sleep beside the warmth of my love who greeted me without grumble as I slipped into dream.

In my restless dreams, the Manzanares, 'where the frogs and mosquitoes', according

En el espejo que todo lo ve vislumbé desde un banquete en Lhardy hasta un estafador en la cárcel mientras viajé al pasado, desde Serrano a Sol en carruaje, cené con Paco el Perro en Café Fornos, ambulé con Galdós y Valle-Inclán, dejando atrás el tintineo de los maniqués musicales de Goya que repican para dos leones parlamentarios hechos de cañones fundidos – el regalo de O'Donnell a un país en ciernes, una inscripción que reza *Nosce te ipsum*, la cual viajó en mi cabeza como un anhelo de tiempos pasados que sirvió para recordarme que yo pisaba donde otros habían andado; almas gemelas, artistas sufistas suspendidos en el fino aire.

¿Dónde estará el aire que enloquece a los gorriones atrapados en la barriga del caballo de bronce de la Plaza Mayor?, ¿los huesos de Cervantes en un convento en Lope de Vega lo mismo que otro O'Donnell y Velázquez, enterrados, o eso dicen, bajo el asfalto? Oh, Rey de las Plazas pequeñas, hermano de Napoleón, ayúdame a desentrañar el misterio de la cabeza de un ternero que gotea sangre bajo el abrigo del asesino, autos de fé en las plazas de conventos, llenas de viales sacros; mis huesos bajo cero en la calle del afilador de cuchillos donde Luis Candelas, el bandido, escogía entre sus presas y la casa de Calderón de la Barca

Salvada de la destrucción no muy lejos de donde pacientes mujeres aun veneran a la virginal Paloma; donde Galileo diseñó una estatua y los socialistas se reunían en torno a mesas de mármol en un bar junto a Sol para enderezar los errores de una derecha que ideó su himno en la planta baja del Café León, ahora el James Joyce, junto a mi bar a mitad de camino en Alcalá, donde escuchaba a los frondosos árboles de Van meciéndose en Cypress Avenue, y observaba la Casa Árabe y las pinturas de los pescadores de Matug Aborawi en su búsqueda de una vida mejor en el fondo del mar.

A seiscientos metros sobre el nivel del mar, me imaginé la marejada de las olas, la inmaculada gaviota del acantilado, todo lo que había dejado atrás por ti: un maestro ambulante que vendía verbos en vez de dijes en las cercanías de la estatua de Fleming, salvador de los corneados, donde un gentío delirante lleva en hombros al héroe hasta la puerta, donde el filantrópico Duque me instó a una *penúltima* en Silma antes de que la agradecida llave girase y de vuelta en casa a dormir junto a la calidez de mi amor que me saludó sin quejidos mientras me abandonaba al sueño.

En mis turbios sueños, el Manzanares, 'donde las ranas y mosquitos', dice

to Quevedo, 'die of thirst' but I was carried in a downpour along the hill of the sliding buttocks and halted in my tracks by the giant from Extremadura who whispered a prayer for me to the Black Virgin of Atocha train station, scene of carnage, with its exotic garden and dumping pond for turtles, the river, my lick of Shannon, spoke to me of Alexander Dumas and the Marques of Salamanca who could have been his model for Montecristo.

Delicias was my model train station where Dr. Zhivago walked on crushed marble that felt like snow and the shocking red flags flew in Franco's Spain as I slumbered towards indecipherability and surrendered to Dali's gigantic dolman in the Plaza that cast a phallic joke on all who stopped to view his tribute to Gala and Newton's discovery – gifts from the artist to the mayor, along with Victor Hugo's walking stick, in memory of one who was unique. But there was more to take in

And take in I did: a copper-coated olive tree and the metallic sculpted plates of your hymnal, symbols of your urbanized story, *donde el presente es el pasado en el futuro siempre*: a common door, a leaf from the lung that keeps your people breathing, a flower to brighten their day, gun, cable, nut and bolt, book, battery, mobile, the shell of prehistoric sea that covered the sum of what you are, your blush and pride beneath an abandoned umbrella in the rain, the gutters clogged with debris as we scurried to our next port of call in this metropolis.

So many ports and havens to berth for awhile: an inconspicuous garden of romance to mull over family heirlooms of a lost age, paintings by El Greco, Murillo, Ribera and Zurbarán in Ceralbo's town house with its *aguamanil* and transparent clock to keep the Marques refreshed and consoled by his concept of time. In another garden a shade under the oldest tree in your demesne going back to 1633 and used by Napoleonic troops to make an embrasure for a cannon from its branches, a message carved by an anarchist.

Messages from the past in a Moorish watchtower and fortification, visible today but otherwise found underground to where mediocrity seems content to consign the unpalatable or replace with more grandiose banalities for a measure of wheat in a wall –

Quevedo, 'mueren de sed' pero un torrente me arrastró por la colina de los traseros resbaladizos y me paró los pies el gigante de Extremadura, que por mi musitó una oración a la Virgen Negra de la estación de tren de Atocha, sitio de matanza, con su exótico jardín y estanque para echar las tortugas, el río, mi trozito de Shannon, me habló sobre Alexander Dumas y el Marqués de Salamanca, quien perfectamente podría haber sido su modelo para Montecristo.

Delicias fue mi estación de tren modelo, donde el Dr. Zhivago pisó el resquebrajado mármol de niveo tacto y las chocantes banderas rojas se izaban en la España de Franco mientras en mi vigilia viajé a lo indescifrable y en la Plaza me rendí al descomunal dolmen de Dalí, que bromeaba fálico con todo aquel que se paraba a ver su tributo al descubrimiento de Gala y Newton – agasajos de artista a alcalde, además del bastón de Victor Hugo, en recuerdo de uno que fue único. Pero había más de lo que nutrirse

Y bien que me nutrí: un olivo bañado en cobre y las placas de metal forjado de tus himnarios, símbolos de tu urbanita existencia, *donde el presente es el pasado en el futuro siempre*: una puerta cualquiera, una hoja del pulmón que infunde aire a tus gentes, una flor para esclarecer sus días, pistola, cable, pernos y tuercas, libro, batería, móvil, el cascarón del prehistórico mar que envolvió la suma de lo que hoy eres, tus vergüenzas y orgullos bajo un paraguas náufrago en el aguacero, las alcantarillas a rebosar de desechos mientras escapábamos a nuestra próxima parada en esta metrópolis.

Tantas paradas y refugios donde echar amarras un rato: un ignoto jardín de los romances donde meditar sobre legados familiares de tiempos inmemoriales, cuadros de El Greco, Murillo, Ribera y Zurbarán en el palacete de Ceralbo, con su *aguamanil* y reloj transparente para que el Marqués esté fresco y reconfortado por su idea de tiempo. En otro jardín, la sombra bajo el más pretérito de los árboles de tu heredad, ahí desde 1633 cuando las tropas Napoleónicas de sus ramas se sirvieron para fabricar una tronera para cañones, el mensaje que un anarquista cinceló.

Mensajes del pasado en una atalaya y alcazabas moriscas, visibles hoy, mas búscalas si no bajo tierra donde la mediocridad se presta alegre a dar puerta a lo desagradable, o a sustituirlo con trivialidades más ostentosas, y todo por un kilo de trigo en la pared –

si le grain ne meurt, a mall for a cinema, an ice cream parlor for a house of ill repute! I jest, of course, but I am no longer a stranger and wear my scars with pride, especially those of the mind, forever in my thoughts, you are like fire and water on my spine.

si le grain ne meurt, de cine a centro comercial, ¡de casa de lonocinio a heladería! Bromeo, por supuesto, pero soy conocedor ya y me engalano orgulloso con mis cicatrices, y más las de la mente, siempre en mis pensamientos, eres fuego y agua en mi columna vertebral.

Fire and water you will always be no matter what devastation mammon inflicts, forever to endure because of a sign that reads REFUGEES WELCOME like Lady Liberty's Give Me Your Poor, even if they ring hollow. Fire and water will persist in your capacity to absorb incompetent legislators, attempted coups, the proliferation of the corrupt and the intolerance of those who have yet to learn the rhythms of your *glorietas, paseos, puentes* and *rondas*, your mountain views, the soul in those elements that gave life.

Fuego y agua siempre serás sin importar la devastación que la ostentación inflige, soportable por siempre gracias a un letrero que reza REFUGEES WELCOME, como el Dadme Vuestros Pobres de la señora Libertad, incluso aunque no valgan un duro. El fuego y el agua persistirán en tu afán de absorber legisladores ineptos, intentos de golpes de estado, la fecundidad de lo corrupto y la intransigencia de esos que no armonizan aun con los ritmos de tus *glorietas, paseos, puentes* y *rondas*, tus paisajes montañosos, el alma en esos elementos que infundieron vida.

A life gifted to me here, lived amongst you as an Irish-European, with your poets, songsters, painters and travel writers, the gamut of opinion, a neighbour's child with an incurable illness, festivals and funerals, life-blood of students who taught me to teach, extended families and strangers who left impressions, visitors who never overstayed, the man who always bought three sardines, the old lady who folded her paper napkin as though it were linen, the knife point of near death at the hole in the wall.

Una vida que aquí me das, viviendo entre ti como un hiberno-europeo, junto a tus poetas, cantarines, pintores y escritores de viajes, el espectro de la opinión, el niño de un vecino con su enfermedad incurable, festivales y funerales, un elixir de estudiantes que me enseñaron a enseñar, parientes lejanos y extraños que me dejaron impresiones, visitas que no se apalancaban, el hombre que siempre traía tres sardinas, la anciana que doblaba la servilleta como si fuese lino, la afilada hoja de la muerte aledaña en un cajero automático.

At my dying you will be in my bones, your songs and your poems, along with those of the western isle and will you read me then as I go into your hard ground or a softer earth in Donogmore or Tiorabhain, finitely quenched? But enough of that morbidity while I can still drink the Arab girl of the chufa, seek out the residue to draw a smile from your soul, cheer on my mattress makers, walk your arteries at evening with my love to tease you and stop at a tavern to raise a glass to an inexhaustible generosity that is Madrid, Madrid, Madrid.

A mi muerte yacerás en mis huesos, tú y tus canciones y poemas, junto con aquellos de la isla occidental, ¿y me leerás entonces en mi camino a tu duro suelo, o quizás bajo una tierra más suave en Donogmore o Tiorabhain, por fin en calma? Pero basta ya de morbosidad mientras todavía puedo beberme a la niña árabe de la chufa, rebuscar en los despojos para arrancarle una sonrisa a tu alma, despedirme de mis fabricantes de colchones, tus arterias andar en la noche con mi amor provocador y hacer escala en una taberna para brindar por la inagotable generosidad que es Madrid, Madrid, Madrid.

Notes

The writing of this poem was greatly helped by my reading of *Hidden Madrid. A Walking Guide* (2007), by Mark and Peter Besas, and *Las calles de Madrid* (1995), by Pedro de Répide.

Beatriz Villacañas is a poet, essayist and literary critic. She is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Universidad Complutense, Madrid. She is a corresponding member of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and History of Toledo. She has translated English and Irish poets such as William Shakespeare, W.B. Yeats, Seamus Heaney, Michael Hartnett and Brendan Kennelly. She has written numerous articles on Irish Literature and her book *Literatura irlandesa* (2007) is the first complete study on Irish Literature in the Spanish language.

German Asensio Peral obtained his bachelor's degree at the University of Almería (Spain) with an honorary distinction. He earned his Master's Degree in English Studies at the University of Almería. He is currently working on his Ph.D. dissertation on Irish writer Flann O'Brien and his journalistic production. His latest publication is "Myles na gCopaleen's Cruiskeen Lawn and the Politics of Revival." *Nordic Irish Studies* (2016).