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Poesía en Traducción: Poetry in Translation

Westview Staff

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In addition to offering years of dedication as Westview editor and creative writing instructor at Southwestern Oklahoma State University, Fred Alsberg has published numerous poems in a variety of journals and magazines, including the Louisiana Review, Oklahoma Today, the Greensboro Review, and Sundog: the Southeast Review. His chapbook, Reassembling Dust, was published in 2007 by Puddinghouse Press, which later published a collection of his themed poems, Harry the Hack, in 2012.

Three of Alsberg’s previously-published poems appear in the pages that follow alongside translations by Cynthia Peña, who is a Spanish professor and the Spanish Program coordinator at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. Peña co-authored the Spanish conversation book Hablemos de teatro, and her fields of expertise include twentieth-century prose poetry in Spain and Spanish America. In addition to her teaching and research, Peña has earned an M.A. in creative writing and has published a book of poetry titled Collage sobre tinta y papel.

The opportunity to work with fellow writers in the Department of Language and Literature inspired Peña to translate Alsberg’s poems in addition to selections by fiction writer Kathy Toy Miller for a bilingual reading at SWOSU in 2009. The translation process was difficult at times; however, Peña says she liked noticing the unique rhythm of each poem and the way the words worked together, and she enjoyed the challenge of creating the same effect in Spanish.

The pairs of poems collected here reflect both Alsberg’s poetic craft and Peña’s craft in poetic translation, related but distinct pursuits. Whereas the poet must begin with his creative vision and only then modify his work with regard to restrictions based on his notions of form and propriety, the poetic translator must begin with the vision of her source poem and make creative judgment calls between the literal accuracy of her translation and the variations from literal accuracy that might more closely represent the spirit of that source poem.

This set of poems, positioned face to face in conversation with each other, reveals that translation is more a vibrant form of art than a mere exchange of one word for another. The word translate stems from the Latin term translatus, which means “to carry over.” Peña’s translations carry not only the words but also the tone and substance of Alsberg’s poems across the boundary of language to an expanded audience. She also brings to these poems her own sound, rhythm, and perspective. Through the art of translation, Peña crafts pieces that resonate with Alsberg’s visions while simultaneously transforming them into something entirely new.
Fred Alsberg and Cynthia Peña

Photo by Amanda Smith