

MANDORLA

NUEVA ESCRITURA DE LAS AMÉRICAS • NEW WRITING FROM THE AMERICAS

Excerpt from / Fragmento de *Mandorla*, Issue 14

ANNA DEENY

THINGS WE LAMENT:

MAROSA DI GIORGIO'S *CLAVEL Y TENEBRARIO*¹

Quisiera contar cómo nacían las cosas.

I'd like to tell how things were born.

—*Marosa di Giorgio, Clavel y tenebrario* (1979)

How do we lament a change in our interpretive processes or, more specifically, figure meaning circumscribed within our minds, the possibility of a certain otherness gone lost? Marosa di Giorgio's *Clavel y tenebrario*, directs our attention to things around us and how they "were born"—pots, pans, cutlery, frogs, mushrooms, flowers—things with which we dwell that recall an irrecoverable childlike world. These things aren't striking because of their innocence, strangeness, or unusual juxtaposition with other things, but because of the promise—how they mean—inherent and arising from their simple presence, and because of how that promise then recedes. The things in *Clavel y tenebrario* are born in the dark surrounded by multiple catastrophic circumstances; di Giorgio's text signals the Uruguayan military dictatorship under which she wrote and published in the 1970s, the Christian crucifixion, and, finally, Lamentations, a book of the Jewish *Tanakh* and the *Bible's* Old Testament that mourns the conquest of Jerusalem in the sixth century BC by the Babylonian ruler, Nebuchadnezzar.² Di Giorgio

grounds her poetry in the dictatorship and a seemingly endless history of oppression—that of the Jews—in addition to Lamentations, a sacred poetic text that also attends to and laments radical changes in the processes by which its poetic voices interpret the world around them.

CLAVEL Y TENEBRARIO

A flower thought to be indigenous to the Mediterranean region, the *clavel* thrives mostly in family owned farms throughout Marosa di Giorgio's hometown, Salto, Uruguay. *Clavar* in Spanish literally means "to nail" or "to hammer." But the flower's species, *caryophyllus*, is derived either from the Greek *karyophullon* or the Arabic *karanful*, meaning "clove or pink color." *Caryophyllus* is also related to the Latin *carne*, "flesh," the English "carnation," and thus the flower's association with the Christian "incarnation." In the Southern Cone, the carnation's center and surrounding leaves have been likened to the ocular pupil and iris. It seems this visual resemblance gave way to medicinal uses of the flower as infusions made with the carnation's leaves were once prepared to reinvigorate weary eyes and cleans ocular infections.³ *Clavel* thus converges the fleshy eye with flesh itself, the embodiment of otherworldliness, and the act of hammering, clubbing or nailing a metal or wooden spike with a broadened flat head into a material porous enough to give way to it.

The *clavel's* many associations are intensified in *tenebrario*. From the Latin *tenebrae*, meaning "darkness," the *tenebrario* is a large triangular candelabrum. It's used during the matins and lauds throughout the last days of the Christian Holy Week, a period that recalls the torture and execution of Jesus who was nailed to a cross. At the start of each Tenebrae ceremony, all of the candelabrum's fifteen candles are lit. As one or several in attendance chant the book of Lamentations, each flame but the topmost is extinguished successively. The Tenebrae ceremonies move toward almost absolute darkness accompanied by a cacophonous racket as the attendants silently leave. Again, Lamentations mourns the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. But the actual conquest that culminates in the wrecking of the Temple, along with the imprisonment, enslavement, murder and

exile of the Jews, is recounted in the preceding Book of Jeremiah. In these texts, God is attributed with having directed this ferocity as punishment for the city's sinfulness. The *tenebrario* is thus the centerpiece of a ceremony that represents mourning and redemption, torture, cruelty and sacrifice, as it also manifests a radical alteration in ocular and aural conditions. Light receding, darkness expanding, sound convulsing—these are the challenges of poetic figuration that di Giorgio draws attention to in the title of her book.

LAMENTATIONS

In Hebrew, the book of Lamentations is called *Eicha* (עֵיכָה, 'èkâ) meaning "Alas" but also "How." It's as much an exclamation of grief, of its dimensions, as a grappling with its perplexing causes and existence—"How is this possible?" A combination of various forms that include the funeral dirge and communal lament, Lamentations is composed of five poems. All poems but the last are an acrostic series of elegies in which each verse begins with a letter of the twenty-two letter Hebrew alphabet. Lamentations 1 and 2 represent the personification of Zion as a devastated and weeping woman. Zion bewails the death of her children and the ruination of her city, as she furiously demands attention from God and those who pass by. "O Lord, look and consider how worthless I have become! / Come, all you who pass by on the road, consider and see: Is there any pain like my pain—that which He caused me."⁴ She also accuses God of extreme ferocity and questions the scope of his cruelty. "Should women eat what they bore, the children they have raised?... / You killed them on the day of your wrath, slaughtering without mercy. / You invited, as though to a festival, men to attack me from all sides."⁵

Lamentations 3 is made up of sixty-six very short verses as each letter is repeated three times, establishing a rhythmic climax with a centripetal force that draws attention away from the first and second poems.⁶ Even though the first person singular narrator here mourns for those who suffer and die, the effects of that mourning upon his own soul, body and capacity to figure seem to be his main concern. Witnessing the extent of God's wrath—children dying of hunger, mothers eating those dead children, rape, abandonment and alienation—breaks

down his ability to see and speak. He says, "I am the man who has seen hardship under the rod of his anger. / He led and guided me into darkness and gloom."⁷ Deprived of the sense of sight, the narrator's body has lost its formal integrity—"He wore out my flesh and skin; he broke my bones."⁸ And later, "He ground my teeth in the gravel; he trampled me into the dust."⁹

Although Zion admits guilt, a convention of the lament, as Tod Linafelt has observed, the emphasis of the first two poems is on her—the city's—suffering and the unanswered questions she brashly poses to God. Linafelt notes that Christian exegesis in the modern era de-emphasizes and even belittles Zion's stance that "demands a response on behalf of her children," a response she never receives. Instead, Christian critics privilege the third poem in which the poetic voice is interpreted as a male narrator who gets beyond his grief and guilt to achieve hope.¹⁰ Linafelt recuperates the history of Jewish exegesis of Lamentations after Auschwitz in order to emphasize "the expression of *suffering* rather than the meaning behind it...the vicissitudes of *survival* [rather] than the abstractions of sin and guilt...*protest* as a religious posture [rather] than capitulation or confession."¹¹ Di Giorgio engages both exegetical positions that pertain to *Eicha*, the first being a condition of collective suffering that has no beyond, no other side or recourse—suffering *as protest* represented through Zion, the city. The second pertains to Jeremiah's challenge, which is how to figure oneself—how to see and speak—as the conditions of that figuration change, as light and the distinctions of sound are transformed to darkness and cacophony.

Notes

1. This short essay is part of a larger chapter that considers Marosa di Giorgio, Emily Dickinson, and how individual meaning sustains its freedom—its own society—as it navigates the pressures of consent and a common language.
2. For the debate regarding the book's historical, structural and temporal unity, see Samuel Tobias Lachs, "The Date of Lamentations V" in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Jul., 1966) 46–56.