

## SINS OF THE FOREBEARS

Peg Boyers. *Honey with Tobacco*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

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Born in 1952 at San Tomé, Venezuela, and raised in multiple locations thereafter, among these a pre-Revolutionary Havana, Peg Boyers had not, to my knowledge, written about this Latin-American childhood, until the poems that constitute the first section of her latest poetry collection *Honey with Tobacco*.

Though I hesitate to identify Boyers as a Cuban-American author, this first section displays an inordinate attachment to the island, and the back cover too defines them as “poems that explore the poet’s Cuban American experience.” One would expect such a poet raised in exile (or at least in the Diaspora) to remember with righteous rage and acerbic sorrow the catastrophe of a homeland lost to the oblivion of communism, yet Boyers’ poems tend to eschew political certitudes or public pronouncements on history, her losses more familial than national, more mordant than solemn, more ironic than tragic. Nonetheless, even as a backdrop, the island is rendered with copious detail and eidetic vividness.

For example, the interplay between the tropes of sugar and tobacco, so emblematic of Cuba, as the erudite Fernando Ortiz demonstrated in his seminal study *Cuban Counterpoint: Sugar and Tobacco*, is among the most inventive that I have read in a long time. Nonetheless, I would add that this book’s exoticism, however one qualifies it, lies less in any axiomatic tropicalness and more in the glare of opulence of someone born into the economic and cultural elite, giving Boyers a singular perspective among Cuban-American poets who are predominantly, if not exclusively, of middle-class and even working-class origins.

*Honey with Tobacco* exposes a class consumed by pleasure, surrendering themselves to voluptuous sensory delights, and thereby susceptible to ennui, their many sins succulently sugar coated by money and privilege. Boyers probes, disturbs, even lacerates the delusions of nostalgia whose underbelly, memory, is often, and brilliantly, represented as insidious, even toxic, and thus in this sybaritic world of luxurious affluence, the “machine of regret,” as Boyers calls nostalgia, is all the more reprehensible because it sanctions and magnifies the false memories of a corrupt class.

For example, in the poem “Family Portrait,” set in the Venezuela of

1956, we confront a wealthy family protective and enamored of its own lies, its own fiction of normalcy, which are contradicted by secrets of “seduction and betrayal”:

It's the bland fifties but the news  
has not reached Venezuela

where the bougainvillea and hibiscus  
obscenely bloom.

In our backyard tropical oblivion  
the family freezes for the photograph,

and for a millisecond captures falsity  
for the record.

“Agua de Violetas” is another poem that evokes the insidiousness of nostalgia through the speaker’s memory of “*agua de violetas, eau de violettes*” (note the inevitable pun on violation), that sensual smell of perfumed violets, “aroma of infancy, precise / signifier of innocence,” that was belovedly consumed by the wealthiest Havanese:

Of course it was in the Tuilleries  
that I remembered the violets, the pungence

of daily promenades in sandy afternoons,  
nannies gossiping at park benches;  
children, cleansed, starched, anointed

for the daily exhibition, the ritual of display  
and mutual approval. How sweet the smell  
of belonging, the confirmation of class.

Perhaps the most disturbing memories are those of sexual transgression, the kind that one readily associates with the corrupt elite, as in Tío (Uncle) Cheo, the Franciscan and family pederast, who haunts several poems, especially “Tobacco,” from which these lines are taken:

Tío Cheo, you weren't like the rest. Your  
arms were smooth and pink and fine.  
And your breath

smelled of *guarapo* when you leaned over  
and song to us

in your pitch perfect voice

American show tunes you'd picked up in college  
before the seminary, before  
the priesthood, before Uncle Ben

nailed you, took off your frock  
and drove you  
to Bellevue

where drugs and shock-treatment  
dulled away desire.

The poem “Mantilla” slyly alludes to this incestuous relative through the erotic image of the “long gauzy shimmer / draped over our bare shoulders / so as not to offend saints, or arouse priests.” Nonetheless, the poet’s privileged upbringing, this “imperial, enchanted childhood,” as it is called in “Transition: Inheriting Maps,” receives a pointed critique in the allusion to E.M. Forster’s *Passage to India* in “Playa Colorada”—

We would arrive in caravans,  
hampers overflowing with food and drink  
like Aziz and his party on the way to Malabar.

The colonials and their servants away on an outing.

This critique of the imperial family acquires a scathing tone in the image of the mother consuming an oyster, a disturbing eroticism suggestive of infidelity that powerfully conflates lust and cupidity:

Once, I saw my mother sucking  
and oyster out of another daddy’s hand.  
Her dappled face bobbed and smiled and her tongue

searched the shell for pearls.

This reviewer would be remiss in not pointing out some of the formal achievements of Boyers’ *Honey with Tobacco*, especially for someone not shy about displaying her ability to craft verse rich in devices of sound. For example, “Agua de Violetas” gives us an intoxicating mixture of consonance and alliteration, with deftly rhythmic counterpointing too, in imagery somewhat reminiscent of the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier:

A Havana variant suffused with violets:  
Cologne in skinny fluted bottled,  
Purple splash of release from lessons

And the eternal watch of parental eyes.  
Pigeons strutting after corn, the occasional iguana  
Basking near the hibiscus—spiky but benign.

More examples of the poet's impressive command of a formal free verse, executed with sprezzatura, as well as the ingenuity and humor of her figures, can be found in these lines from "Tobacco" and "Mantilla":

The cousins asleep in rows of cots on the veranda,  
the ocean breeze billowing the netting  
so it scratches my cheek—the lightest of stings.

Little huddles of white, snug as tobacco hills  
swathed in gauze, baking the blonde inner leaves  
to wrap, ring with bands and burn. ("Tobacco")

Paper-thin prayer thing,  
neither shawl nor veil nor scarf nor cape:  
swaddler of babes and believers:  
to leave you is to group up. ("Mantilla")

Therefore, I recommend *Honey with Tobacco* for its exuberant language, precision of craft, and tough eloquence.