Walking to Mojácar
by Di Brandt, with translations by Charles Leblanc and Ari Belathar

Reviewed by Tanis MacDonald

In September of 2005, I sat in the natural amphitheatre of the Oodena Celebration Circle at the Forks in Winnipeg, one of an audience of perhaps 150 people who came to a reading under the stars sponsored by that year’s Winnipeg International Writers’ Festival. Within sight of the ceremonial Cree powwow site and with the rivers visible through the trees, and then audible after sunset, I heard Di Brandt read “Nine River Ghazals” for the first time. The poem addresses the bartered and often betrayed legacy of land on a post-industrial planet, with special emphasis on locating the grief of such loss at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. In the first section of “Nine River Ghazals,” Brandt rewrites the Biblical psalm and glosses Elizabeth Smart’s modernist prose-poem by setting her grieving narrator on Manitoba soil: “By the banks of the Assiniboine we sat down and wept” (4); in its final stanza, Brandt uses Ojibwa spirituality and Shakespeare’s King Lear to sum up the painful neglect of responsibility for what we were given: “Winnipi is furious. / We should have ta’en better care of this” (20). The effect of hearing this poem in that setting was remarkable, like discovering another lung with which I could breathe.

I write this as my introduction to this review of Di Brandt’s latest volume of poetry, Walking to Mojácar, partly to offer a frame of reference from which I will discuss this numinous book that insists on the passionate politics of locality, translation, and literary and spiritual connection in balance. But I also want to intimate the power that Brandt commands in her negotiations between public utterance and private conversation, and it is this dialectic that informs the subject matter, affect, and scope of all three sections of Walking to Mojácar.

The book’s first section, “Welding and other joining procedures,” also begins its title sequence by repurposing the language of physics to examine how some procedures are joining – and some are divisive – in a witty appropriation that is respectful to its source material while also offering an object lesson on the power of metaphor to produce rhetorical structures in which we invest. Taking as her beginning scientific discourse on mitochondrial tethering, Brandt spins out the metaphor to muse on how the mysterious has its place in scientific discourse as much as in poetry: “Experts are unable to explain tethering’s nubile, numerous, nirvanic hold over organisms. Poets and lunatics, fetuses and toddlers, lovers and mothers, have lain in its arms, made their beds there, feathered, flown in its ether, forever” (34). The long lyric prose poems that make up the sequence “Optimistic thoughts on the incidence and value of mass extinctions in the development of intelligent life on our beautiful planet now in such dire peril” proceed from the writings of writer and shaman Martin Prechtel; “Walking to Mojacar,” the book’s final eponymous section, demands a way to look at the future from the spiritual and intellectual traditions of the past.

One of the ongoing conversations that Brandt wends through the book is with burgeoning theories of eco-criticism and the culture of global environmental concerns. However, just as Brandt’s Griffin-nominated Now You Care swung between the energies that sparked passionate accusation and
those that offered reparative strategies, so too does *Walking to Mojácar* bypass polemics in favour of a devoted engagement with history and human frailty. The book is divided into three sections, each poem translated into (or from) a language other than English which appears on the facing page of Brandt’s poems in English. Certainly the translation into French (by Franco-Manitoban poet Charles Leblanc) and Spanish (by exiled Mexican writer Ari Belathar) perform the function of “localizing” the poems into the language spoken by people in the cities in which Brandt sets the poems: St. Boniface, the French quarter of Winnipeg, once home to Louis Riel, and Mojácar, the ancient Andalusian city known for its blending of cultures and religions. But French and Spanish are also the languages in which the two surrealist poets to whom Brandt is writing back in this book: French poet and activist René Char, and Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca. These French and Spanish sections open and close the book, respectively; sandwiched between are Brandt’s “trans(e)lations” from the German of Mennonite hymns, repurposed here as “Hymns for Detroit” to sing with purposeful sorrow to “Our soft brains, / Faltering immune systems / . . . Our forgotten rain dances” (96). The trans(e)lation, a term recently brought into Canadian practice by Erin Mouré’s work with Galician, is less a literal denotative translation than a connotative refiguring of the action of the language, and Brandt’s “Hymns for Detroit” brings the sacred project of spiritual praise together with the profanity of industrial dissolution, picking up where her “<Zone: le Detroit>” poems from *Now You Care* left off.

*Walking to Mojácar* begins with an epigraph that Brandt has drawn from Char, which reads in part “we shall not draw advantages from our shadows.” Like Char, Brandt has her sights on poetry that may be of real service to the revolution, and like Char, she strives to use the surreal to underline the real, noting again and again what is surreal about our post-industrialized culture in order to advocate for the genuine. Lorca is the other ghost in this collection, and Brandt’s references to New York and Andalusia as well as the political nature of both surrealist writers support her search for ways to honour what she calls “relational sensitivities” in the post-industrial world. Brandt also offers a subsection of poems that are dedicated to specific people, but turn in their intimate address to comment on the public power of remembering.

Brandt’s first essay collection, published in 1996, had the subtitle “Strategies for writing across centuries”: a reference to her Mennonite culture that remained true to 18th-century principles, her own emergence into the 20th century as a writer, and now part of her writing and thinking life in what Brandt calls the “post-postmodern” 21st century. *Walking to Mojácar* is also a book of strategies for writing across centuries, and with the variety of intertexts, histories, and traditions that she references, Brandt’s reach in this book is enormously ambitious. But driven by its fierce locality, its tenderness for wildness, and its aching search for a language that can satisfy in the way that a “theory of everything” cannot, *Walking to Mojácar* is a book that praises both beauty and resilience, and has the scars to prove it:

The gods visit us not because we have cried, but because
we have resolved, humbly, in the midst of fears, tears,
to begin again, to be always, again, beginners.

“The Late Evening News” (74) ♦

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