

YERMA is an unavoidable prophecy. It lured me into devotion. What began as a misunderstanding, turned into a relationship. YERMA became a mantra. How does one encounter YERMA? Who is YERMA? Why should YERMA be heard? Most of all, is YERMA even present?

To know if YERMA is present, first we should have a throwback to the day that we met, in 2017. It was one of those days on which I felt that urgent urge to look for books.

Mevius: Loods 1, Havenstraat 3, 1075 PR Amsterdam

Yerma. (Sombria.) ¿De dónde vienes, amor, mi niño? De la cresta del duro frío.

As soon as I arrive, I dive into one of those cages in front of the store where piles and piles of books are compressed one upon the other, with no order or design. Most of the books seem pretty dull or are physically in an awful state. But then, in between all these crooked and damaged items, YERMA¹ appears: bright, small and orange. A hand-size pocket book with a nice solid, hard cover. YERMA actually comes together with POETA EN NUEVA YORK. In capitals above the titles I read: 78 / FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA, a name that I had never encountered before. The book turns out to be written in Spanish, but nonetheless its physical properties excite my senses. Moreover, at the end, there's a whole series of intriguing illustrations.

¿Qué necesitas, amor, mi niño? La tibia tela de tu vestido.

When it comes to books, two conditions need to be fulfilled for me to allow myself the expense: both the content and the form of the book should attract me. One of these two here was missing. The written content was in Spanish, which therefore is of 'no value' to me: I do not know that language. Still, I bought the book. In order to justify its purchase, I decided to use it in a project. Its attraction was rationally unbeatable.

This was the start of an intricate relationship with this object/book. I took it with me everywhere. And bit by bit I started to unravel the Spanish phrases, first by trying to put them into French and then translate them back into English. More than a mere translation, this double interpretation of the play became an exciting journey. YERMA's present everywhere. When in 2018 the job was done, YERMA had become more than just an unknown text. It had become a mantra, a system for me to explore new forms of speech.

Spui Boekenmarkt: Spui, 1012 PP Amsterdam

In December 2018, YERMA calls again. It's a Friday morning. I hadn't been to the book market in a while. YERMA², the English translation, appears in front of me, as a simple supple cover pocket book, quite expensive however, for it comes from Lucebert's private collection. I put it down. But two booths to the left, there YERMA is again. Now in an English translation that costs only two euros. Of course that's the one I buy.

What do you need, my love, my son? I need the tip of your heel to be vestige.

It was an offer for me to enter a new phase in our relationship. I started to look into this English version, translated by James Graham-Luján and Richard L. O'Connell, as well as into Federico Garcia Lorca's biography³, who I found to be an emblematic figure in Spanish literature, murdered under the Franco regime. It was a tragedy preceded by one of his own making. One that, just as his personal one, had only very little fiction to it, but much to do with bold realities. YERMA's subtitle: 'A tragic poem'. And how tragic her fate was! Beaten by a desire she could not fulfill, YERMA commits an atrocious crime, murdering her husband in an attempt to become fertile. Lorca wrote his play in 1934, the year in which it was also performed for the first time. It was two years before his murder.

'What do you lack, sweet love, my baby? The woven warmth in your dress.'

Yerma. From where do you come, my love,

my baby?

'From the mountains of icy cold.'

What do you lack, sweet love, my baby?

I quickly discovered that both the original play and my interpretation shared the same atmosphere. YERMA was no longer a system. YERMA had become a figure. A conflicted and intricate character, in her relation to herself, to her close friends and relatives, but also to society. Be it in Spanish, English or French, YERMA is always striving in the same direction: the direction of a child. Since, I have found out more about the context in which YERMA was written, and what exactly YERMA was going through. It finally stood out as a thing of its own.

YERMA became the skeleton around which I then could wrap the flesh of a new play.

A table portrait: Yerma.

Yerma. When those homes are not tombs.

It seems that my chance encounter with YERMA was all along striving towards this very point: the making of a new play. Already having been given the bones, and next its flesh, all that was missing was a situation in which YERMA could be re-shaped. That situation I found in January 2019, in Switzerland, at Porrentruy⁴. My friend Adèle Beaulieu and I had been invited to a dinner party, where we shared a table with her grandfather Jean-Jacques, his partner Emmanuelle, a retired prostitute, and Philippe, a gentle farmer. And while the evening passed, I realised that here I was amidst all the main characters of YERMA: Jean-Jacques, he was Juan, Adèle was YERMA, Emmanuelle was Maria and Philippe, Victor. Together they gave me the tools needed to embody YERMA one more time.

So instead of 'Is YERMA present?' the question here should rather be 'How present is YERMA?' For YERMA is anywhere, and could be anyone.

Yerma. 'D'où viens-tu mon amour, mon chéri? Je viens

de terres arides au-delà des montagnes
Quels sont tes besoins mon amour, mon poussin? Le confort de ton bassin?