

Suzanne Jill Levine translates Gabriel Magana Merlo

Contributed by Robyn Z. Bell

Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" Wallace Stevens Nothingness In the Rough: La Nada (pp.) Gabriel Magana Merlo, tr. Suzanne Jill Levine review by Robyn Z. Bell

Nothingness In the Rough forms a terrific book. I didn't expect that, having glanced at the lineation and decided the lines look goofy. The back-cover's mention of Mallarmé also sounded highly unlikely—until I opened Gabriel Magana Merlo's book and started jumping from line to line. My initial experience of his poems, small-on-the-outside/big-on-the-inside, my experience of so much happening in so little space, occurs because his poems ignite surprise, meaning, intensity. That's art. It happens in English because of Suzanne Jill Levine's astonishing translation. Magana Merlo, a great Mexican poet, lives in Guadalajara, Mexico. A collaboration between Magana Merlo and Levine, Nothingness In the Rough is well served by its publisher's dual-language text (diálogosbooks.com). One may compare a phrase or word in English with its compatriot in Spanish. To paraphrase Frost, poetry is what gets found in this translation. In any language, that's rare. Magana Merlo's compression recalls Emily Dickinson: pared lines set off hand-grenades of understanding, when you get them. It's possible with him, as with Dickinson, for the reader to stumble--you fall into a canyon between lines and look up, and, like a rocket rocketing, the poem has gone on, lifted star-high. Then you start over, trying to hang on as the first stage drops off, second stage drops off, and the final stage takes you to some sort of new mental space. To know a poet, as with knowing a person, requires many encounters. (I'll bypass the obvious—"Do we ever know anything"—and just say, "Yes.") Nothingness In the Rough is the first book of Magana Merlo to appear in English. It's fresh as wet paint.