tasks is a milestone in the work of Víctor Rodríguez Núñez, one of Cuba’s and the Spanish language’s most compelling poetic voices. I won’t go into detail here about his life or work, there are numerous sources in that regard. What I do want to highlight is that beginning with the publication of his eighth and ninth books, Midnight Minutes I (2006) and Midnight Minutes II (2007), which are, in truth, just one poem made up of more than two thousand verses, his poetics changes radically. Up until then it had been firmly rooted in lyrical neo-colloquialism, rejecting socialist realism, but still anchored to realism; playing down the poetic I, but not moving beyond romanticism. And then a turning point. Still refusing to renounce what he defines as “dialogical poetry,” still refusing to make any concessions to solipsism, the poet carries out a work with a greater power in the representation of reality and the creativity of poetic language.

In tasks readers are faced with a search for identity beyond national borders. The lyrical subject is constructed not as Cuban or American, not even Cuban-American, but instead as a synthesis that leaves behind these conditions. It is a book of chronicles about Rodríguez Núñez’s returning to Cuba, and at
the same time, his daily exile in the US, where identification prevails over differentiation. At the heart of the book is flight, as the author notes, “between what we are and what we were,” and where “there’s always a departure, a soaring and a falling, and sometimes even a hanging in midair. Then, clouds are blank pages where we jot down, among expected turbulence, our passage between reality and desire. Identity, in the end, is a well-founded illusion, desire more than reality. What’s important is that I don’t always write about Cuba or in Cuba, but always from Cuba.”

*tasks* is the book that follows *Midnight Minutes* and where a shift toward a new poetics solidifies. Here for the first time Rodríguez Núñez eliminates uppercase letters as a marker for units of meaning. This change in form has profound implications for content, a radical move toward a new form the author calls “edgeless poetry.” No limits to sense, no point where an idea or emotion begins or ends, the greatest fluidity of thought possible. And so, it’s not just verses, stanzas, or poems that are enjambed, it is meaning itself. In this radical rebellion against coherence, discourse loses its rhetorical connections, becomes elliptical, and requires an active reader. It’s the rhythm, based on a combination of verses made up of seven, eleven, and fourteen metric syllables, as well as the regularity of the strophes, which unify this stunning poetic discourse.
By translating tasks I’ve continued with my own task of making a certain kind of Spanish American poetry, often marginalized, often forgotten, better known to an English-reading audience. Needless to say in this case, it was a challenge. Just as the poem requires an active reader, so it is for the translator: how to translate a reality that is for the most part untranslatable? I cannot know it like the poet himself, but I have experienced it deeply in Cuban Spanish. Rendering it all into English was the first time I attempted to talk about it in my native language. Such an endeavor on my part mirrors the shift in Rodríguez Núñez’s poetics. tasks signals a turn in my own work: the blurring of edges has lent itself to a moving beyond the contentious borders between translator and poet. Here I have finally found my own poetic voice in the voice of the poetry I translate.

Katherine M. Hedeen
Mount Vernon, Ohio, July 1, 2016
después de todo soy
un aparecido en esta barbería
espejos carcomidos por la sombra
sillones sin entrañas
ventanas con las cruces del último ciclón
barberos que preguntan demasiado
mientras cortan con óxido

barbas de medio siglo
me temen las tijeras
soy duro de pelar
yo vengo de otro sueño donde los gallos cantan
exóticos el mapache ladrón
la higiene de los baños
ni siquiera un volcán

un tiznazo de nieve
soy una marca azul en el silencio
césped recién cortado framboyanes
prodigios de la duda
after all I’m
a phantom in this barbershop
mirrors eaten away by shadow
chairs gutted
windows x-ed from the last hurricane
barbers asking too many questions
while they rustily cut

beards half a century old
scissors dread me
I’m hardheaded
I’m from another dream of roosters crowing
raccoon bandit
hygiene of bathrooms both exotic
not so much as a volcano

a sooting of flurries
I’m a blue mark in the silence
freshly cut grass flamboyant trees
wonders of doubt
en el espejo hay alguien que me mira
saqueado por la luz
un viejo conocido

el desconcierto de la identidad
un cristal que se pule
con la certeza de que no seamos iguales
nos ponemos una camisa a cuadros
y tropezamos en las escaleras
desterrado otra vez
pelado al rape por coloquialista

descuadrar estos tiempos y la cosmovisión
por no lanzarme desde el ventanal
ni naufragar en líquidos amnióticos
ni sembrar marabú en el incauto
jardín de la academia
vago sin mucho afán por este mundo
ancho pero no ajeno

me demoro en la nieve la palma real al hombro
me muero mas revivo de nostalgia
sobre todo no debo nada a nadie
in the mirror there’s someone gazing back
ransacked by the light
an old acquaintance

identity’s distress
glass polished
certain we’re unequal
we put on a checkered shirt
and stumble down the stairs
uprooted once more
crew-cut for being colloquial

failing to square these times and worldview
for not jumping out the window
or shipwrecking in amniotic fluids
or planting marabu bushes in the academy’s
reckless garden
unrushed I wander through this world
ample but not alien

I linger in the snow a royal palm on my shoulder
I die but revive from nostalgia
most of all I owe nothing to nobody
mi patria no son las antologías
yo soy un tojosista no te olvides
sólo cuentan las páginas ganadas
a la economía de subsistencia

una antistrofa más y estaré libre
los barberos trepidan
ante la ingravidez de mi brazo dormido
puedo ver la humedad bajo los guantes
a las cejas hacer su muy sutil trabajo
mis venas son profundas
    nada me hace sangrar
my homeland isn’t anthologies
don’t forget I’m a tojosista
all that counts are the pages salvaged
from a bare-bones economy

one more antistrophe and I’m free
the barbers shake
before the weightlessness of my sleeping arm
I can see the damp beneath their gloves
eyebrows doing their subtle work
my veins are deep

nothing makes my blood run