LOVE POEM WITH EXILES

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*Love Poem with Exiles* is a collection of poems with a critical preface. The poems are varied in terms of subject matter and form. In the critical preface, I discuss my relationship with poetry as well as the idea that we inherit poems, and that if we are inspired by them, we can transform them into something new.
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Poems in this collection have appeared or are forthcoming in the following publications:

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .............................................................................................................. iii

## PART I: CRITICAL ANALYSIS

In The Mouth of Poetry ............................................................................................................... 2
Work Cited ................................................................................................................................ 20

## PART II: LOVE POEM WITH EXILES

Section I ..................................................................................................................................... 22
Carcass, South Texas Dirt Road ............................................................................................... 24
Black Throated Sparrow ............................................................................................................ 25
Landscape with a Dead Goat ..................................................................................................... 26
Suicidas ..................................................................................................................................... 27
A Man and His Dogs .................................................................................................................. 28
The Sleepwalker Never Wakes Up ............................................................................................. 29
Love Poems with Exiles ............................................................................................................. 30
Sonnet for Human Smugglers ................................................................................................. 31
Sonnet Holding a Knife ............................................................................................................. 32
What The Night Is Made Of ..................................................................................................... 33
Lineage................................................................................................................................. 34
Hector.................................................................................................................................... 35
Mug Shot................................................................................................................................. 36
Madman Firing into the Crowd............................................................................................. 37
Ramona.................................................................................................................................. 38
The Secret History of Persecution......................................................................................... 39
Corpse Fauna.......................................................................................................................... 40
Migrations............................................................................................................................... 42
Section II. ............................................................................................................................... 43
In My Mouth the Mouth of a Child....................................................................................... 44
Parents................................................................................................................................... 45
Drawing Blood, Drawing Bread........................................................................................... 46
Tarantulas ............................................................................................................................... 47
Motocyclist, No Helmet........................................................................................................ 48
Source................................................................................................................................... 49
Sonnet with All Its Grief Cut Out........................................................................................ 50
Sonnet Left Behind in a Hotel Room.................................................................................... 51
Drawing Humans and Animals, Heads Represented by Circles, Bodies by Straight Lines .... 52
Four Love Poems................................................................................................................... 54
Girl, Wanting to Remain Anonymous ............................................................................... 55
Landlords............................................................................................................................... 56
In Spite of Love.................................................................................................................... 57
Death Study

Section III.

Dear Father,

Overcoat for the Wind

Fire

Late Winter, Late Hour

Sign of Our Times

Theory of Dreams

Monterrey, 1981

Man at Carwash, Loop 288

The New Racists

Antisong

Ten Disordered Recollections

Tough Guy

Sonnet, Bar-Hopping

Fugitive

Diner, 3:15 a.m.

Stockyards

Supplication
PART I

IN THE MOUTH OF POETRY
When I was in high school, I would flip through the pages of my textbooks, read the poems, and looked at the portraits of famous poets, thinking: “So this is how you get to be immortal.” Although I didn’t read as much poetry as I should’ve read during these years, I still wrote poems, youthful, sentimental. However, by this time, I had found my calling: poems.

The more I read and wrote poems, the sooner I realized that poetry was not only a way for my name to be remembered after my death (a youthful wish), but more importantly, I realized that through poetry I expressed my love for language, and the need to voice my experience with the world. By writing poems, and reading poets such as Orlando Guillén, I discovered and validated my existence. I was aware that my life would end one day, but before it ended, I wanted to be able to say:

I am the blood’s remains I am the wound
I am the beast without the bridle of death
I am the wingless bird of luck
I am the stride without life’s wings
I am the famished plate the main course
The knife the fork of food
A morsel of death’s meal. (32-8)

Through images, Guillén, as well as other poets, concretized the world for me, and helped me see it anew. But poems also reminded me, in the same way that they remind Jorge Fernández Granandos, that my life

has consisted of going along leaving things
by the wayside, useless
and beloved
in places I’ve forgotten. (21-24)

Isn’t this what life amounts to? Leaving behind living things—our dreams, our loved ones, our beds, things that recede into the dark corners of our memory, and we never knowing if “they disappear / or only change places” (3-4). But if they disappear, where do they go? Do we
diminish in their memory in the same way they do in ours? Whatever I’ve abandoned, or
whatever has abandoned me, will eventually make its way into a poem. After all, through
poetry, I name the things I love, and give the things I hate a last name. Vicente Quirarte tells us
that the desire to write poems begins once

We want to name the center of things,
the sonorous heart of things,
the silent fervor of things.
We believe: solving the mystery
saves us from the stretch
of hours that memory pays out (1-6).

This is one of the reasons why I write: to name, to remember, to give memory a mouth in order
to reconstruct our world with words, to “affirm its most durable matter” (Quirarte 17-18); and
the most durable matter is not our life—it’s everything that touches our lives. It’s what stays
behind: Our children, our books, our pets, maybe even a great poem, if our ambition is as great
as our need to write, if it’s as great as our love affair with language.

As a poet, I’ve been honing my voice by not only reading the poetry I’ve inherited from
the past, but also by reading contemporary poetry. Because I don’t want my voice to stagnate,
I try to find new possibilities for poetic expression, which sometimes implies taking traditional
poetic forms and reinventing them so they can feel contemporary. A poet who has guided me
in this endeavor is Julia de Burgos, who takes the formality of the Spanish sonnet and
transforms its traditional subjects into political ones:

Your white blood, white, is washing the stains
Of the fierce parricide; and in liberating lights
Your red blood, red, wakens the brotherhood. (9-11)

You would not see political references in the sonnets of Luis de Góngora:

Clear honor of the liquid element,
Sweet rivulet of shining silver sheen!  
Whose waters steal along the meadows green,  
With gentle step and murmur of content! (1-4)

De Burgos takes a classic form and uses it to convey her revolutionary and political ideas. By taking a classic form and changing its purpose, De Burgos’ political concerns transcend the immediacy of her time in order to implicate the past. Since Góngora’s time, De Burgos’ country, Puerto Rico, has struggled for independence. Hence, by writing a political sonnet, De Burgos amplifies her voice and loudly calls for the liberation of her country in the same way that she liberates the sonnet’s form by changing its subject matter. Through a sonnet, De Burgos symbolically links the present and the past by letting her readers know that her country has longed for independence for centuries.

From Julia de Burgos, I learn to transform a traditional poetic form and infuse it with contemporary political concerns. Following de Burgos’ footsteps, I wrote “Sonnet for Human Smugglers,” fleshing out the form with political ideas:

Take care of them. If they want water,  
Dump them in the river. If they want  
To live, let them loose among the rattlesnakes.  
If they want to breathe, gag them with black hope.

Let the desert mouse nest in their white bones.  
Give them shelter with your greed. With your rape.

The road kill is a sign you’re almost home.  
Point to it and show them who they are.  
Their life’s a documentary.

But for you, everything is possible.  
You’re the map that leads them astray.  
Priest leading a funeral procession.

Take them. Cripple them with promises.
Backaches that keep them from killing you.

But Julia de Burgos was not the only source of inspiration for this poem; the spirit of Novika Tadic’s poem, “Antipsalm,” is also here:

Disfigure me, Lord. Take pity on me.  
Cover me with bumps. Reward me with boils.  
In the fount of tears open a spring of pus mixed with blood.  
Twist my mouth upside down. Give me a hump. Make me crooked.  
Let moles burrow through my flesh. Let blood  
circle my body. Let it be thus. (1-6)

Tadic’s surrealist take on the traditional psalm makes it sound contemporary, but through his use of direct address, he also evokes the past, specifically John Donne’s Holy Sonnet XIV that begins:

Batter my heart, three-person’d God; for you  
As yet but knock; breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend  
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new. (1-4)

Tadic and Donne beseech God’s violence so that they may know they’re loved, so that they may know they’re in God’s favor. However, because Donne wrote his sonnet centuries before Tadic, one way to see Tadic’s poem is as a continuation of Donne’s sonnet. In the same way that Julia de Burgos takes the Spanish sonnet and enlarges its possibilities by changing its content, Tadic enlarges the language, and unlocks the form, of Donne’s English sonnet by making it feel contemporary.

I combined two strategies in my sonnet: De Burgos’ use of a closed form to convey a political theme; and Tadic’s imaginative reversal of the Biblical psalm’s tone of supplication. In “Sonnet for Human Smugglers,” I write about illegal immigration by using Tadic’s ironical direct
address, and I also make a political statement, like De Burgos before me, by using a traditional form that would allow me to flex the muscle of my voice by rethinking what a sonnet should look like, and what it should sound like. On my take of the sonnet, for instance, I indented some of the lines and I eliminated the rhyme scheme. By rethinking poems that inspire me and by re-imagining poetic forms, I begin to find a voice that remembers the past, but that also speaks about my present concerns.

Ultimately, poems reaffirm what it means to be human. We all suffer. We all love. Nonetheless, a good poem gives us the language to perceive and articulate the world, and ourselves, in a new way. Julia de Burgos offers a nationalist hymn for her country; Novika Tadic gives us a new prayer to address God. Poems such as these raise the stakes for me; they make me more ambitious as a poet because, like De Burgos and Tadic, I also want to re-imagine the way we use inherited poetic forms in order to voice contemporary concerns in a contemporary language.

I want to believe that with every poem I write, I get a small glimpse of my soul. Carlos Drummond de Andrade thought that this thing we call “soul” is vaster than the universe. It is, if we believe that when we write poems, we write the soul of our forefathers, our grandmothers, and our children; it is, if we believe that when we write poems, we write down our history, and through our mouth the voice of the past is heard, a voice that maybe was silenced by fear, by persecution, or by illiteracy. With a poem, we explicitly, or implicitly, write the history of our origin and begin to lay a foundation for those who will come after us.

When I was a child, my father would take me to visit my great grandfather, Juan, in Mexico. I remember the small kitchen, the smoke of the fire, the pots, and the cornhusks next
to the pots. At my father’s bidding, I would go over to where my great grandfather sat and I would kiss his hand. Then he would hug me, whispering something I could never make sense of. It was a whisper that has stayed with me, more than his smell of fields, of horses, of hard-work. He was over ninety when he died, and every time I think of this man, I think of Antonio Deltoro’s verse:

I remember one night
when the dog’s barks
and the candles, miniscule and human,
revealed in me the fragility of my elders. (16-20)

By the poem’s candlelight, the past and the present are clear; it’s by this light that I now see the strength in my great grandfather’s hands; it’s by this light that I now hear that my great grandfather’s whisper was not a greeting, or a prayer, but a poem, incomprehensible, yet loud enough for memory to put its mouth around it. Now, there is something of my great-grandfather’s soul in this essay. Here, I remember him in the same way poems I haven’t written about him remember. After all, at the heart of a poem is remembrance: our past, our present, our future. A poem allows me to think about where I’ve been, where I am, and where I want to be.

Before Antonio Deltoro shed light on the dark recesses of my memory, César Vallejo lit a candle so that I could see that past and future can intermingle in a poem: in one, he remembered his own death; in another, he remembered the death of his brother, Miguel: “Brother, today I am on the stone bench by the door, / where we miss you terribly” (1-2). This is how we talk to the dead. Because in order to talk with the dead, we have to choose words that they recognize as easily as their hands recognize the fur of their dogs in the dark; words clear and calm as water in the wineglass; words that night shelters as marshes do their ghostly fires
(Teillier 1-11). And if we talk with our dead, afterwards, all we’re left with is emptiness. It’s this emptiness that Vallejo alludes to and that concerns us: this emptiness we try to fill with syllables, with lines, with music; an emptiness that, paradoxically, is always part of a poem, and for which some of us are thankful for the purpose it gives us our lives.

I like to think that writing poetry is an ongoing project that is never done, never completed. Because a poem is the offspring of a poetic community, we’re responsible for its survival. Think of De Burgos, for instance, who makes the sonnet form feel contemporary. Think of how I follow her footsteps and return to the sonnet’s form to voice contemporary concerns. By returning to the poems we love, and to the forms that challenge us, we play a role in their survival and also in their transformation. Sometimes we rewrite them. We allude to them. We’re inspired by them. Of course, not all of our children are perfect. Some are born blind; others, without tongues. So we let them die.

But the ones we love, we cradle in our arms, we bandage them, we heal their broken bones, we offer them our breath and our blood. To ensure their survival, we take them to our mothers, we introduce them to our lovers, and if necessary, we feed them the milk of whores. If we love them enough, we beat the shit out of them, we memorize them, or we copy complete verses into our own poems, just like Roberto Bolaño fleshes out a poem with verses belonging to Juan Ramón Jiménez. Sometimes this is what we need: someone else’s flesh in our poems so we can feel like we belong, so we can feel that the poets we love and admire did not just write for themselves, but wrote so we could inherit their poems, so if necessary, we could transform them.

In another poem, Bolaño lucidly names a source of his inspiration:
Now Parra is walking
Now Parra is walking around Las Cruces.

Get walking, then, Latin Americans
Get walking get walking
Start searching for the missing footsteps
Of the lost poets
In the motionless mud
Let’s lose ourselves in nothingness
Or in the rose of nothingness
There were the only thing heard are
Parra’s footsteps
And the dreams of generations
Sacrificed beneath the wheel
Unchronicled. (1-2, 51-62)

With these lines, Bolaño remembers Nicanor Parra, but more importantly, with this allusion, he speaks against erasure, against forgetting poets who have influenced the way we perceive the world. Bolaño ensures that whoever reads his book also utters Parra’s name. He is aware of the power of naming, and maybe this is why in the poem, “Muse,” he not only praises poetry’s power, but he also names himself, disclosing that, though poetry is constant and beautiful like a star, “Roberto Bolaño...is transformed, / is paralyzed, / becomes older and stupider” (53-54). He will die. His verse might be forgotten, but poetry, as monument, is indestructible. Bolaño identifies the paradox inherent in the writing of poetry: poets die; poetry, as art, lives on.

If only it were possible to have what Fabio Morábito wants to have in a every room: its opposite. To say,

“Turn on the dark, love,”
and leave it on
all night to wake
to darkness
and not know which night envelops us (4-8)
To turn on the opposite of stupidity; to turn on the switch that’ll bring us youth when we feel our grayest. Poetry is all some of us have “when everything is dark, / when everything is lost” (“Muse” 22-23). Our bodies may break down, may deteriorate; they may leave us helpless at the edge of the tub, but poetry will always be the crutch that gets us across the desolate places of our life.

When I begin to write, I sometimes feel that someone else has already written the poem I intend to write. After reading Edward Hirsch’s poem, “Lay Back The Darkness,” for instance, a poem about a son’s helplessness to help his father in need, I almost didn’t write “Migrations,” a poem that speaks about the difficulty of watching my father grapple with memory loss. I thought, what’s the point? But Hirsch’s portrayal of senility reminded me of what I had to write. At one point in the poem Hirsch watches his father cease to be everything he once was:

My father in the night shuffling from room to room
is no longer a father or a husband or a son,

but a boy standing on the edge of a forest
listening to the distant cry of wolves,

to wild dogs,
to primitive wingbeats shuddering in the treetops. (13-18)

Hirsch’s father, in his senile state, returns to infancy, and as I read the poem, I couldn’t help but think of my own father because the lines captured perfectly his state of mind after a terrible accident left him struggling with his memory. After reading Hirsch’s poem, I brought it in to my house. I kept it on the lamp table. However, because my father hardly understands English, I didn’t read it to him. But as I saw him shuffling from room to room, whispering to himself, I knew he was reciting his own poem, a poem we both inherited, but to which only he knew the words.
Eventually, despite Hirsch’s memorable depiction, I wrote “Migrations.” I had to.

Although Hirsch’s poem reminded me of my father’s state, it was not my father that he wrote about; hence, I had to give voice to my own father’s suffering as Hirsch did for his. I had to authenticate my own anguish in a language that I could call my own:

When he slept, his eyes went on seeing—

The ceiling cut into pieces like cake
by the streetlights. The strange woman
leaning close, watching him sleep.

He was always in another country
even as he sat on the sofa.
Where am I? he would ask
the news reporter on television. (5-12)

I like Valery’s observation that poems are “abandoned” by poets. Whenever I “abandon” a poem, it’s because I think it’s done; there’s nothing more I can do for it in terms of form or language. However, this doesn’t mean that someone will not come along one day and be inspired by it and change its form, or take its language and reuse it. With this in mind, I like to think that poetry is sharing, that, to a great extent, poetry is collaboration. By using poems as springboards, a poet collaborates with the past; the new poem emerges out of one poet’s relationship with another. Even a great poet like Cesar Vallejo found inspiration in others, picked up where others left off. In the poem, “Intensity and Height,” for instance, that begins with the line: “I want to write, but out comes foam,” Vallejo riffs off on a sonnet by Lope de Vega that begins, “I want to write, but my tears won’t let me” (Armisén qt in Kristal 6). This is a perfect example of how a great poet is inspired by the poems he loves. Sure, Lope de Vega was dead when Vallejo turned to him, but a poem is the perfect organ by which the living and the
dead can have a dialogue; in short, a collaboration. Through poems the dead speak to us, and through them, we respond.

Vallejo returned to Lope de Vega because he learned from him. This is why I return to Vallejo, because he acknowledges the value of reading and riffing off other poets. By riffing off Lope de Vega, Vallejo shows us that a poet is always in conversation with other poets, and that he had to emulate in order to eventually find his own voice, a voice embedded in Lope de Vega’s. Eventually, Vallejo found a voice loud enough to articulate the disquiet of his soul.

As I wrote my collection, I came across the poem, “I See in My hands the Hands of My Parents,” in which Rafael Vargas sees one thing inside another. In his hands he metaphorically carries the whole extent of his life: his parents, his birth, his childhood, his daughter. Resting in his hands are the hands of those who engendered him, and also the hands of those he engendered:

I see in my hands the hands of my parents
their strolls through parks now disappeared
………………………………………………………………..
the proximity of their mouths while embraced in sleep
………………………………………………………………..
I see in my hands my birth
my footsteps on sand and my first trip to the sea
………………………………………………………………..
I see in my hands the kindness
with which my daughter pierces the skin of the world. (1-2, 4, 9-10, 19-20)

I liked Vargas’ poetic strategy, and thinking I could add to what he started, I wrote my own poem:

In my mouth the mouth of my daughter,
In her mouth the mouth of my son,
In his mouth my mother’s prayer,
In the mouth of the prayer,
The nightingale my father brought back
To life with his breath.

In my mouth the mouth of my youth,
In its mouth the mouth of rain peeled to bone,
In the mouth of the rain the mouth of the rain.

In my mouth something other than my mouth:
My daughter’s hair as we fold in the dark,
My son’s voice calling my name.

In my attempt to make something new out of Vargas’ idea, I reference the mouth as a place of discovery, not the hands. Vargas’ poem inspired me because of its transformative nature, because of its concrete images embedded in an abstract idea. This is the power of good poem: it leads others to want transform it again and again. This is what Octavio Paz had in mind when he claimed that poems that inspire us “transform themselves indefinitely” (14). It’s in this spirit of transformation that I continue writing a poem when I think it has been “abandoned,” when I think that it is not yet complete, when I think the poet has given up on it because there was nothing else he or she could’ve done for it. If a poem inspires me to continue writing it, it’s because I want to be part of its greatness; it’s because I want to transform it as much as it has transformed me.

I keep returning to Vallejo because his poems speak to my deep-rooted longing to transcend death. Maybe this is the same reason why José Emilio Pacheco and Donald Justice also return to him. Explicitly, or implicitly, all three of us have alluded to Vallejo’s poem, “Black Stone on a White Stone.” Pacheco, for example, writes, “Over the dinner table, alone, I read Vallejo” and “César Vallejo.” These poems are loaded with Vallejo’s style and subject matter, elements that expand the context and scope of Pacheco’s poems. Take the poem, “Cesar Vallejo,” for instance, which begins: “Bad for my bones, this dampness, / that penetrates like a
hair shirt” (1-2). The words “bones” and “dampness” recall the general tone and images found in “Black Stone on a White Stone.” There is no rain in Pacheco’s poem, but the word “dampness” suggests wetness, drizzle, rain. The image of “bones” figures predominantly in Vallejo’s poem too, an image that makes it impossible for us not think of Vallejo when we read Pacheco.

Pacheco continues Vallejo’s concern about the transient nature of things in “Over the dinner table, alone, I read Vallejo.” While watching ants blackening bread, Pacheco meditates on how these tiny creatures “enforce / the continuous erosion of the world” (8-9). Through these two poems, we get a better sense at what Pacheco means when he claims that “all literature is intertextual, be it voluntary or involuntary, explicit or implicit” (Docter 6). Who wouldn’t want to be associated with these great poems? Pacheco’s poems succeed in their own right, and because of their success, he will forever be associated with Vallejo, a poet he admires. Hence, by fastening our name to other names that have survived the wreckage of time, we attach our name to tradition. Someone will come along who will simultaneously utter our name as well as that of another poet; it’s saying, Nicanor Parra and Roberto Bolaño at the same time; it’s saying Cesar Vallejo and José Emilio Pacheco in the same breath.

However, associating our name to the name of a celebrated poet is not going to mean much if our poem is false, if there’s nothing genuine about our intention, if our imitation, or our allusion, or our collaboration, or all three in one, gag the whisper of our voice. Let us remember that collaboration is not mere imitation, but rather, an act of transformation. Vallejo transforms Lope de Vega’s lines to make them new; Pacheco transforms Vallejo’s ideas about
the transient nature of things by continuing where Vallejo left off. In my case, I want to think that I transformed Rafael Vargas’ poem, and made a new one, by riffing off his poetic vision.

As I read Pacheco’s poems, I saw how Pacheco practiced finding his own voice: he appropriated Vallejo’s images and tone, and by the end of the poems, a new voice emerged; a concoction of voices interweaving through time: Lope de Vega, Vallejo, José Emilio Pacheco. Like most poets, Pacheco keeps an ear close to the heart of the dead.

In Vallejo’s version of “Black Stone on a White Stone,” there is a vision of death and an obituary. Vallejo foresees himself dying in Paris in a rainstorm, and then, two stanzas later, he transcends time and space to see his own corpse, a brilliant move that metaphorically clarifies a poet’s longing to live long enough to see his own death, long enough to hear his name remembered. With this leap in time, however, Vallejo complicates his vision of death, making it unclear as to who, or what, has taken his life. Who killed him? Were his murderers the unidentified “they,” or did Vallejo die by his own hand? Vallejo’s cause of death remains a mystery in the poem, though I like to think that it was Vallejo who took his own life. It would truly speak of his struggle with life, with language, with God, with death.

Thirty-five years after Vallejo’s death, Donald Justice takes Vallejo’s vision of death and writes, “Variations on a Text by Vallejo,” in which he imagines himself dying in Miami, in the sun. In Justice’s version of Vallejo’s poem, there’s no rainstorm, no lonely roads. No one strikes Justice with sticks or ropes. There’s no antagonism against life, against humanity. Justice simply dies, gravediggers about their business, life moves on.

Justice has broken bread with Vallejo, and leaves us with an American poem that gives us an understanding of a poet’s struggle with language:
And I think it will be a Sunday because today,
When I took out this paper and began to write,
Never before had anything looked so blank,
My life, these words, the paper, the gray Sunday. (14-17)

With Justice we have a poem about dying in an American city, in the American sunlight. This is why Vallejo’s poem is great—it is, to quote Octavio Paz, an “organism in perpetual revolution” (14). It keeps changing through time—it changes when we rewrite it; it changes when we reread it; it changes us when we open its mouth in order to find our own voice.

Death is hard at work to break my teeth, to extricate my tongue from its root, to erase my name from the poems I write. As harsh as death is, in a poem it can be turned into a pretty thing, or even as something humorous. In “Out in the open,” Serbian poet Aleksander Ristović, translated by Charles Simic, reveals his preoccupation with death, a preoccupation that unites all poets. In the poem, we have a person thinking of committing suicide, but

is forced by nature’s call
to delay the act,
and so from his squatting position
finds himself taking pleasure
in some blades of grass
as if seeing them for the first time
from that close,
while his cheeks redden,
and he struggles to pull from his pocket
a piece of paper
with its already composed
farewell note. (4-15).

Although humorous, Ristović’s preoccupation with death is not lost on Simic who takes a darker tone in his own poem. Death puts in a long day at work, Simic reminds us. He’s everywhere:

watches our wives ironing laundry; smells the sweet roses of our daughters setting the dinner table. We are surrounded by death, and like most of us, Simic is also afraid of it.
All of us are sentences with beginnings and ends. But a few lines of poetry can be our salvation from oblivion. A few lines can survive in the collective memory. “The poem both moves in time and tries to defeat time,” Simic claims. “Images, metaphors, and words with their multiple meanings conspire to trap the imagination of the reader in place” (Hulse 25). Of course, all this is just poet’s talk. The reality is that time is unstoppable, and Robert Herrick puts it plainly: “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, / Old Time is still a-flying” (1-2). Nonetheless, images are vital to our memory and to the conversation poets have with each other. Images, for example, can navigate across languages. We see it in Simic, his poetry, rooted in the surreal; his images not only calling back to Ristović, but also Vasko Popa’s poems. Here are lines from “In The Ashtray”:

A huge hand
With a burning eye in its palm
Lurks on the horizon. (1-3)

Burning eye: the red of a lit cigarette transforming the hand into a nocturnal creature that “lurks” on the horizon. The ordinary becomes extraordinary. If I didn’t know these lines were written by Popa, I would have thought they came out of Simic’s imagination. In the poem, “Fork,” Simic uses a similar image:

As you hold it in your hand,
As you stab with it into a piece of meat,
It is possible to imagine the rest of the bird:
It’s head which like your fist
Is large, bald, beakless, and blind. (5-9)

Where does Popa end and Simic begin? For Simic, Popa begins as an influence, his poems fitting into what Simic considers great poems, which are those that deal “with fundamental questions of life and death in a language that is memorable, that both moves and makes us
think" (Hulse 62). Vallejo’s poems also fit this definition. These poets, as well as the poets associated with them, are trying to wound time with the sharp blade of language. Language can cut through the darkness of forgetfulness. It helps us remember and it helps create a dialogue with the world. However, in the dialogue we create with the world lies the desire to transcend death. Some of us want our names to be remembered. I wonder if this is why Vallejo, Simic, Bolaño, and Justice name themselves in their poems.

By naming ourselves in poems, we take the first step to mythologize our lives, to make them transcendent. Naming ourselves in poems constitutes longing and an act of recognition: we recognize our transitory nature, and we long for the echoes of our names to remain a bit longer on this earth than our bodies will. Furthermore, by naming ourselves in poems, we turn ourselves into symbols, into language that is part of an artistic creation. It’s a way to remind others that we were here, *alive*.

I’ve tried naming myself in a poem, and seeing my name as part of a poetic line, felt strange, as if I had become disconnected from the thing that defined who I was, as if for a moment, I didn’t recognize the being that my name comprised. Now, I reread Vallejo, and I find the opening of his mouth so that I may exit:

> Octavio Quintanilla ha muerto. He struck them with a stick and with a rope. His bones keep asking: “What’s so great about dying?” Witness the thunder limping back into the clouds.

With these lines, I return to the beginning, to the idea of poetry I had as a teen—that by writing poems one becomes immortal. I’m not sure how true this is. But the one true thing about poetry is that it helps us live our lives; it helps us remember our past, and it helps us reflect about our present and our future. We find ourselves in poems, and we also lose ourselves.
Often, in the poems of others, we find the inspiration to continue speaking to the world even if our desire is to stop. We inherit poems, and though complete in their own way, we often want to keep writing them, we want to keep transforming them, because in them we recognize an experience that, however resonant with our soul, must be spoken in our language. By transforming the poems we love, we also transform ourselves, and by doing so, we speak of our love for the world.
Works Cited


Pacheco, José Emilio. City of Memory. San Francisco: City Lights, 1997.


PART II

LOVE POEM WITH EXILES
Carcass, South Texas Dirt Road

You still remember how it looked
after the drizzle licked it clean.

What the hell was it?

Blades of grass
taking the place of teeth;
the wind’s snout
sniffing the sockets for a light
long gone.

You must've been nine years old,
old enough to know that dust is raised
to fall on dust again.
Old enough to keep secrets.

Years turned horror into poetry.

Maybe you want to go back.
To the wood-framed house sitting
on concrete blocks.
To the mutt you saved from drowning
in a canal. To the girl
who had no faith in you.

Maybe you don’t want to remember her.
She had a pretty yard.
Her father worked
for the city.

And your father without legal papers.
All day digging trenches
for plumbers, always walking
on the dusty colonia road
that darkened when wet

like the backbone of a pig
after a knife unzips its gut
wide open.
Black Throated Sparrow

1
Christ suffering on the cross, tattooed on a man’s arm, reminds me I’m in a city jail

where the mind is boundary
and is helpless to tend the gash
I leave on this world.

2
In another state, undocumented seamstresses sweat in warehouses.

From the fourth floor, one of them sees you and sulks like a soft dagger.

Her sore eyes guide you to men in parking lots. Hands in pockets. Men waiting to be outlived by their children.

3
I’ve spilt the oil of my life on the floor. To clean it I need more than the finger that condemns me, more than these hands made of autumn leaves any fool can set on fire.

I say: my body, my warden.

4
My eye inside yours looks past me. Out there you lord over fields and cross histories that have no place for us.
Landscape with a Dead Goat

There are things you want to remember before the night becomes too thick to breathe.

But you only remember the herbs your grandmother boiled to make you strong. They did. Remember

when you could raise your kid above your head with one hand?

Call it a dream. Call it a field where you get lost and no one goes out to find you.

Now you’re a lame animal whose entrails God will use to see His own future.

He knows where you are: where faith is all there is and you have no use for it.

Everything else is light lost in light.
Suicidas

They came and found only the lint of my voice. 
Then they were gone. 
I want to talk about them, 
these wretches who leave their feathers 
all over the furniture, 
who, in my absence, plaster the walls 
with insomnia.

They leave their clumsy anger 
at the foot of my bed, all over 
the toilet seat. An earring 
on the kitchen floor, evidence 
they are human.

This time I find only the sewer 
stench abandoned by someone in a hurry 
to get elsewhere. Whoever they are,

they have taken 
my pillow and have bent and twisted 
a coat hanger into a cross. 
They have taken my hope and the last 
of my children, but have left no instructions 
on how to get them back.

I want to talk about them. 
I want the stammering of their hands to stop. 
“Don’t come back,” I say, “Don’t come back, 
for I’ve forgiven the doorways 
that let pass all that we love.”
A Man and His Dogs

This morning I saw the man who died two years ago feeding his dogs. He was patient and the smaller pup came up and licked his hand.

I called out to him as you slept. He came to my window, his dogs followed him, wagging their tongues with joy, rubbing their fur coats against his legs.

When you opened your eyes, I wanted to tell you that getting lost is possibility. Tell you, from now on if I say sadness it means I am driving and I know exactly where I am going.

I began to tell you, “Do you remember the man who lived...” Then I stopped when I saw you stretch your body with a yawn as if announcing to the world you had just been born.
The Sleepwalker Never Wakes Up

My father fell from a tall ladder
at the cotton gin. I imagine, before he hit
concrete, he asked, *Where am I going?*
but in Spanish because it’s the only language
that can tell him that dying is possibility. Later,

Pedro said he found him lying like a sack of potatoes,
out cold, his eyes half-way open
as if about to wake from a nap. I thanked
Pedro for calling an ambulance and for keeping
his sense of humor despite knowing
that half my father would return to infancy.

*

My father still wants to drive, still wants
to mow the lawn and hammer the last
nail on the cabinet he left undone. He is here
one moment, and soon after, we see him taking
a walk to 1970 when he was a young man
helping his grandfather Juan break horses,
or working till dawn, irrigating the corn fields.

He worked alone, guiding water with a hoe
as he himself was gently guided by moonlight
as he is now guided by his five year old granddaughter
who asks, *Me compras un dulce?* and he buys her
a candy that sweetens her mouth
like her words sweeten his, and they walk
back to us, looking both ways before crossing
the street, as all of us have been taught to do
since we were kids.
Love Poem with Exiles

The dogs are mute and wait for daybreak. The ones who want to die scatter your eyelashes with their spinal cords. There’s no one here to feed them, to take them for walks along the busy streets where people are naked because everything is hunger. Thirsty because you have named everything.

November has stolen the devil’s keys but refuses to use them. It kicks down doors. It sits on sofas and brushes its hair. The dry leaves that fall from it are small hands missing thumb and index finger.

Men in other countries feel its dampness, and see its black stain on white smoke, a shawl on the chickens scurrying to their coops. The men have no land of their own and the land of others remains quiet and pale like a face adrift in a casket.

I haven’t heard your voice in two months. Your mother brings me soup on Sundays and fills my forehead with kisses. Once she brought me a handful of snow and left her pulse in the embers to keep me warm. “I’ll survive,” I said, and when she said your name, her tongue turned to foam.

Here the night dies of cirrhosis. In other countries the dry cough that rises from the hearts of women has no choice but to hang itself. Through holes in the walls, the women watch their men fold goodbyes like pieces of paper.

The men promise to return but even their names will be erased by the drizzle falling on the pavement.

Their women will never sell their babies. Babies sucking their thumbs. Babies so small they could be carried in purses.
Sonnet for Human Smugglers

Take care of them. If they want water,
   Dump them in the river. If they want
To live, let them loose among the rattlesnakes.
   If they want to breathe, gag them with black hope.

Let the desert mouse nest in their white bones.
Give them shelter with your greed. With your rape.

The road kill is a sign you’re almost home.
   Point to it and show them who they are.
Their life’s a documentary.

   But for you, everything is possible.
You’re the map that leads them astray.
   Priest leading a funeral procession.

Take them. Cripple them with promises.
   Backaches that keep them from killing you.
Sonnet Holding a Knife

The blind must imagine where the road is
taking them. To cook, they must imagine
where the fire and the pot are waiting.

The blind are old and wrinkled, their steps falter
in the highlands of Chiapas.
They’re the forgotten ones, the indigenous,
the ones who can’t see and who won’t be seen.

A tree branch is the eye that leads them.
Their night is a long scarf with holes.

What is it that glues their eyes shut?
That keeps them from remembering the gleam
of shattered glass? A few coins would’ve been enough.

Enough for the fire to flex like a healthy bicep.
The cooking pot, black with giving, and light.
What The Night Is Made Of

I thought all men
who drew maps
on the ground with a stick
were dead.

They want hope,
but keep hanging
their clothes on fences to dry.

One of them walks around
shirtless.

His face, miserable,
as if everywhere he goes
he drags along the memory
of a bad childhood.

He holds up a crooked
finger and writes in the air:
“What day is this?”

I stare at him and wonder:
Is this the way
our bodies keep wanting to know?
The way the mind keeps wanting
to forget?

I tell you:
If the night arrives
with its hair undone,
it won’t have to cut
into our skin
to find us all alone.
Lineage

Where is the warm night when the sweet smell of pig flesh covered our clothes and our laughter? Night when the trees called back their leaves with a squeal, but the leaves wouldn’t listen.

Masculine night, night
dragging the moon’s white tongue.
Night when our Grandfather skinned a pig and you, brother, shoveled entrails into a plastic bag.

*Pa’ los coyotes.*

I was leaving, all of us leaving:
Grandfather’s eyes fixed on the same distance you would know your first time in Sauder City.

Plastic helmet.
Glory shooting skulls.
No solace for memory.

Years later, someone told me about the ambush and the life you saved.

Who knows?

All I can see are your hands scooping out the pig’s offal. How you must’ve felt the heat Grandpa warned you about. Heat of waking from sleep into another sleep.

And who knows who thieved Grandpa’s boots days after he died. Someone walks in them, refusing to tell the dark, restless boys that our fathers remain locked up in minimum wage.

That they will forever bring home the sweat of cotton gins. Carry the dust of cabbage fields noosed around their necks.
Hector

You could’ve been a god.
The sun pointed its finger at you.
You were a king in the fields, leading
his horse to water.

Water left its skin on your skin.
Your skin dawned you.

No god, Hector.
Your voice fades like a crippled footstep
down a dusty sidewalk. Your voice,
a toothless animal afraid of the city lights.

Hang you, Hector.
Drown you, Hector.
Humiliate you, Hector.

You were never the boy who ate
in order to have something to vomit.
No, Hector. You devoured your hand,
your testicles and the funny accent
the hood-rats loved.

You walk the streets, Hector,
wearying your dead brother’s shirt.
A car goes by and someone calls you
by his name. It could’ve been the vulture

that never asks for forgiveness, Hector.
Or the man who fears for his life.
Mug Shot

Because nothing makes you blush anymore, your eyes reflect the shards of darkness you saw as a child. They tell me everything:

How you walked around the neighborhood, eavesdropping on yourself, a body bag the last thing in your mind.

Then you disappeared. I didn’t see you for months, and I knew it was too late for us:

I was leaving the city, you were leaving this life.

What happened to you, descendant of the sewer, descendant of the wino and the whore, victim of the hate crime?

What happened to us?

Now I hear the devil’s cackling as he walks to greet me. He points with his monkey’s tail, brings me the small, black comb I carried for years in my back pocket. “Is this your harmonica,” he asks, and hands it to me, expecting music.
Madman Firing into the Crowd

As it happens, your rectum sprouts flowers:
an orchid, an iris, a rose.
Human stampede, the charge
of panic scattering hair.

A young girl falls at your feet.
She must belong to someone.
To the face with the blurred nose.
To the torso tangled in blood
not its own.

You don’t feel forsaken. Others,
for whom dying is not as easy,
are with you.

You remember: wine
soaking bread, bread
gnawed by mice; mice,
children of time, and time
the problem God
never has to face.

Was that a prayer,
or the taste of ash?

It's over.
The girl at your feet
is carried into an ambulance.
She looks at you, calls you forth,
and whispers her name.
You keep walking, deep
into the dim light of her eyes.
Ramona

If I peep through the keyhole
on any given Saturday night,
    I’ll see Ramona killing herself.

She lies on the sofa for hours,
moonlight sketching her face,
    her blouse so loose I see one
        of her nipples the size of a grape.

I see it all and I see nothing.

I see Ramona’s five-year old
    picking up breadcrumbs.
He grows up fast, trading
a plastic shovel for a switchblade.

He’s in prison now.
Ramona’s signs the letters: “Cuídate.”

One day the warden writes.
I see Ramona reading and I take in
    her screams with my sense of smell.

    On some nights I see an old woman
        tearing off her clothes, howling
at the loneliness that chases her like a knife.

It’s Ramona. Her anguish,
    the shape of dull scissors,
        can’t rip her skin open,
            can’t rupture the vein
where consolation is stored.

I spy on her, agglomerating pieces
of her life,
    remnants of a constellation,
        as if knowing one day this moment would come
and I would throw them at your feet.
Secret History of Persecution

i. Someone says: stray dogs have to be sterilized.

ii. They’ll soon take over the city: be masters.

iii. Headlights: a dog’s muscles pursued.

iv. Twenty dog catchers are as visible as air: secrecy.

v. Electricity stirs in the groin.

vi. Two drink coffee: one wants to know if a dog’s soul is imperfect.

vii. A black dog doesn’t exist in the night.
Corpse Fauna

1

Here, a stove is luxury.
An indoor toilet.
A cup of clean water.

2

Elsewhere, the black heart
of the festering fruit.
The white grin of the fly.

3

Deathbed for my father’s father.
Deathbed for the rusty nail boring into the foot.
Deathbed for the X of your signature.

4

Here, second hand shoes.
Life scribbled on the margins of a book.

5

Elsewhere, the horse’s dry prepuce.
Dinner, a fist of hair.

6

Where’s the altar where the shadow
of your shadow will be sacrificed?

7

The intestine digests itself.
Bring out the silverware!
    House fly on the rim of the eye.
    Flesh fly on the nostrils.
    Maggots in the anus.
Deathbed for my father’s father’s father.

Deathbed for the head full of lice.

Deathbed for the mites forcing your mouth open.
Migrations

When my father lost his memory, 
he went on remembering he was lost. 
*I’m in a desert*, he said. 
*Now I’m in a river.*

When he slept, his eyes went on seeing—

The ceiling cut into pieces like cake 
by the streetlights. The strange woman 
leaning close, watching him sleep.

He was always in another country 
even as he sat on the sofa. 
*Where am I?* he would ask 
the news reporter on television.

He never got the answers he wanted. 
He kept looking for us within 
the closed fists of his eyes, 
finding only water, only sand.
In My Mouth the Mouth of a Child

In my mouth the mouth of my daughter,
In her mouth the mouth of my son,
In his mouth my mother’s prayer,
In the mouth of the prayer,
The nightingale my father brought back
To life with his breath.

In my mouth the mouth of my youth,
In its mouth the mouth of rain peeled to bone,
In the mouth of the rain the mouth of the rain.

In my mouth something other than my mouth:
My daughter’s hair as we fold in the dark,
My son’s voice calling my name.
Parents

They stay behind to tend
wounds that most of us don’t yet know.
   My dad licking the salt
out of my mother’s grief.
   My mother putting a band-aid
   on my father’s empty hands.

   Their voices get quieter by the day, like music
   that slowly freezes in the air.
Their bodies resemble bars of soap

left stranded in water.

   On mild afternoons they stroll to parks
   or to the drugstore where they have a laugh
with the cashier. Then they return
   to the house where we left all
   that was no longer of use.

   What their eyes see is not enough:
   Young faces smiling in photographs,
spilling out of enclosures

that could never contain them.
   Some nights they talk about us,
   their children, who live in distant cities,

who without knowing
   also practice how to be alone.
Drawing Blood, Drawing Bread

First you draw a clock
floating in the air; a bottle of wine,
on the table.

Then an eyelid shaded with bitterness,
eyelash; the rest of the face,
unrecalled.

You want it to be your father’s,
his broken jaw, the thin lips
you’ve heard so much about.

Like true suffering, he’s beyond
representation, outside
of language. Out of all
your soccer games and the first fist fight
you lost.

When you try to draw him, you return
to the house where you’re always
a child. Where you have an absent enemy
whose life you save in your thoughts
and then condemn again.

This time, you want it all
to end in fire.
And because you have no need of it,
you also want to toss
the word murder
into the serrated flames.

This time, you’ll not be alone:

A loaf of bread next to the bottle of wine.
Your mother’s soft hands resting on the table.
Tarantulas

My mind filled like a glass of water
with images of death:

Bald coroner,
    scapel,
    shadow cut in half.

Then, warm milk in my mother’s hands
so I could swallow back
my heartbeat.
“No quiere lastimarte,” she soothed,
reading its presence for nothing
more than what it was: *araña*.

If it didn’t want to hurt me,
    why was it here?

Impossible for sunlight to know
that it is also the source of shade.
Impossible for a child to know
that the spine is sometimes in discord
with the need to move.

My mother fixed my pillow, kissed
my forehead goodnight.

Is this what the illiterate do?
Cover you with a blanket
full of stories? Map your face
with fingers that never forget
where they’ve been without you?
Where they’ll go because of you?

It must be true:
The illiterate have no use for light.
If a match flares in a smoky bar,
it becomes a sign they interpret
as someone else’s longing, knowing all along
they could be wrong.
Motorcyclist, No Helmet

Because you see a skull in the belly of a leaf. Because the earth wants your return. Because everything calls you by the name your parents didn’t give you. Because the bed traps you as you leave behind the footprints of your failure. What you have never been remembers you. It happened when you were a child.

You breathe fear. The whipping your father gave you. But you leave this night because waiting for eternity takes too long. Because now the wind is a woman who smokes. It’s late. No one will track you and end your misery.
Source

The stag with the face of a boy
waits for the blood-thirsty figure
in his eye to approach. The animal
doesn’t flee when my step finds the twig.

In these woods the target waits
for the wound. The ambulance
keeps breaking the night into pieces.
The prayer keeps leaving
its larva in the throat.

One day I’ll teach my boy to unfold
the boat into the sheet of paper it is.
He’ll see the tree and the soft jaw
the rifle has become.

For now the stag bares its tongue
like a bleeding rag. I slip my hand
into its half-open mouth
and enter another life.
Sonnet with All Its Grief Cut Out

The mailbox of your life, always empty.
The woman you loved twenty years ago
Sleeps and breathes next to her plumber husband.
   Their kids, all grown up. The house is quiet,
Ready once again to be filled with moans.

   You lie listening, your eyes closed, awake
Sucking on the nipples of the huge night.
Sonnet Left Behind in a Hotel Room

You’ll find it next to the television.
   In it, someone’s burden of having
to arrive and then depart.

   Before you clean, you read
with the English you inherit from your boss.

Yes, we fucked on the sofa...Yes, there’s a stain
to prove it...

You have enough.

   No, God is always multiplying...

The toilet flush takes what you think
   is a confession written in rhyme.

“He forgot to add,” you whisper:

   Yes, outside my body...my life
asks for forgiveness.
When I draw a stick figure,
it’s always a woman, tiptoeing out
of the page, demanding
to be fed, sheltered, and loved.

Sometimes it’s my mother
who tries to cover the sound
of her footsteps with a white sheet.

She doesn’t want to wake me,
knowing that if I go back to a place
before I was born,
I’ll hold on to her like a thief
grips his last breath.

*Pobre Madre!*

She doesn’t see that she’s fleshless,
and that her bone marrow is nothing
more than marks of lead
that can easily be erased
by my hand.

Other times it’s my sister who comes
with both eyes empty of light.

Her hands are thin, and like crows,
cast a different shadow
than what their shape would lead us to expect.

She reaches out to me
sensing that I want to start over.
But she’s the invisible thing leaning its weight
against the water.
A suicide no one wants to lower to the floor.

*If you want to carry nothingness,
then carry it along with dog shit
in a brown paper bag,* she still says.

I hear you *Niña de mi alma*
even if your tongue is sliced by paper.
Then there are times when my mother
and my sister have enough of me
and send the woman both of them disliked.

First I draw the contours of her labia
and find the clearing
the heat of her thighs
keeps moist.

I draw myself in the shape of a dog
and lick her cunt.

By then, the pulp I slip into
is not mine,
and I’m not in love
with the world,
nor with the only woman
who would love me,

a woman whose face is always in profile
whichever way it turns.
Four Love Poems

1
Nothing was left to chance, to the traffic.
Now it’s hard to tell whose life
is better off without an anchor.
Mine gets lost in your breath.
Yours dives into the glass half-full.

2
The blanket is not as warm as the promise
made without sentences. Still, I am the trap
that liberates you. You are the open
window from where I jump.
But first I must place your small, dark
breasts in the mouth of memory.

3
You’ve been hurt so much, your sex
can’t tell between knife and manhood.
Know this: there will always be time
to be alone, to hold the clock hostage.
The streets are empty.

4
What to do? Your hair is wet.
Birds without hearts and men without speech
wish for what the other is missing. Finally,
we move towards the river without water.
To the bridge we will not cross.
Girl, Wanting to Remain Anonymous

Late fall, just before 6 pm,  
the birds fly off, leaving behind the beating  
of their wings in the crown of trees.

You hear this through the window.

Then you see a mirror,  
overweight with the girl  
who hates her body.  
She hates you too.

You see it, your body,  
closet where all things  
that keep you from living  
are neatly folded.

The fear of drowning,  
for example, is folded  
in half like deerskin.  
Your clothes, wet  
with the empty room  
where you lie at night.

When your hands find  
your breastbone,  
you feel them as oceans  
but you cannot fold them.

You look out the window  
and no one looks back.  
Your gaze, lost,  
doesn’t hear your calls.

It goes about the city,  
empty of your eyes.
Landlords

Have seen strangers kiss your face.  
How they soak the back of your knees with sighs.  
How close they get to your heart  
in order to listen to your blood give birth.

When you are not in, they find a crucifix  
smeared with lipstick.  
They sweep the eyelash made of bone  
under the dirty sofa.

Embarrassed, they open your handbag  
and find a bicycle on fire,  
a polished cranium, two green cents.

You’re not a stranger to them.  
They’ve seen how the cigarette smoke  
zigzags out of your mouth.  
How you smash a fly  
with your favorite book.

Every day they see you descend  
the stairs. They see you soaking with daylight  
underneath your heavy coat. Every day  
they’re relieved the gun hasn’t turned against you.

They want you in love.  
They’ve seen how bad you want it.  
It takes its time.
In Spite of Love

Speaking of the calf
born dead,
I have no opinion.

You have seen its legs
bent underneath its weight,
the half-open mouth,
and the moist fur
nightfall could not shape
into a thing for mourning.

It reminds you of the branch
whose drifting ends
between two stones.

In my case, I can’t say
I remember not being.

But if you must know,
it returns me to the waist
the fog offers to the trees
when I am taken by the quiet
pull of your body.
Death Study

1

It’s in the eye of strangers
as you pass by.

In the movement of your hand,
writing.

In the breeze,
thick as ash.

2

Insatiable belly,
nostril full of sand.

With each passing
day,
a little more lost
in your nightgown.

3

See it for yourself:

Eyes of the dying beast:

Black mirrors,
reflecting
the quick light of
a falling star.
III.
Dear Father,

Know that if the wanderer stays, the smoke the birds bring with their wings will dirty his lungs.

The apartment will smudge in the fire. Then where will we go?

Let’s keep moving, before all your white hair sketches a mountain on the black page.
Overcoat for the Wind

The city’s distances, measured
in smog; all life, measured in kilometers.

And I thought of us, our words
made of sobs, the task of finding out which one
contained our death sentence.

No use. You were so at peace
with how much you knew about your dying
(and who wouldn’t be?)
that you touched and called on all
you couldn’t take. The small garden

where you watered the hours.
Your mother’s name written
on the palm of your hand.

Was this your way of saying resignation?
Or something else?

It was so long ago.

And it’s been years, but I still ask:
Who left me here, where the night is not night
enough to conceal the black dove of your sigh?
The night’s root, palpitating,
but never long enough to reach
the small chamber where the heartbeat is air.
Fire

They’re old and rise to watch
the dawn approach in high heels.
It embraces them
with whispers and the soft
giggles of underage prostitutes.

Their bodies wearing out
like car tires, kept awake
by the shattering of their own bones.

Adamant in keeping
what doesn’t belong to them,
some offer their worn jaws
to the sunlight’s hard knuckles.

They don’t bleed anymore.
They take a punch or two, unafraid
to die in their wheelchairs,
wearing their dark glasses,
all of them sauntering
on the horizon’s tight rope.
Late Winter, Late Hour

I’m walking.
    The frozen branches
        remain quiet, ice
cleaving to their tongues’ underside.

    Time is felt too late.
All time is felt alone.

The girl on the swing, moving
    skyward, will lose all her hair
to the mice building nests.

I won’t say anything
    about the drug dealers on welfare.
    Or about the gifted, who will one day
make meals out of stones.

In an abandoned warehouse,
    someone counterfeits my voice.
    Sore, it has lost
an ounce of youth.

Who can take away what God has
    in store for me?
    What is it? Who knows,

but would you believe

I’ve never been happy?
    Such an easy thing to say:

But the truth is that this is
    someone else’s story.
    It has nothing to do with me;
        it has everything to do with silence.

The silence of the living is
    remembering: remembering
is always about loss.

About time.
But is it up to the trees to carve
initials on our skulls so we can know
that we don’t belong?

I’m walking in this frozen night,
where the spoken word is water
for the deaf,

where each tree keeps waiting
for the sound of their new name.
Sign of Our Times

You leave the imprint of your grief
on everything you touch.
On your eye when you wipe it
with the back of your hand,
on your father’s arm when you help him out
of the shower.

Everything is grief.

Your grandmother’s shawl is still moist
with the memory of her dead son,
his wife, and three children.

Car accident. Only ashes
and the blots left by human fat
were found.

One of the kids was your age.
She was pretty, you remember,
and used words like pomaceous, obduracy,
presumptuous. This last one
she called you more than once.

But you never took the time to find out
what it meant. You were too young
to care, too happy to consider
that even the books you read
pretended you were blind.

But you weren’t blind
and you’re not blind now.

You leave the imprint of your grief
on everything you feel, on everything you see,
in the same way it was left on you
by those who felt you and saw you through their own.
Theory of Dreams

There’s always a beach, and out of the two people walking, only one of them is alive.

No one can decipher the prophecy the sea delivers in the foam.

I can’t explain this.

But in dream, I know how it feels like to be shot in the back of the head.

Blood splattering everywhere like a deck of cards thrown out the window of a moving car.

In this dream, blood is no longer punishment for the body. Its release gluts the stomach with rest.

Suddenly I arrive at the place where I sleep.

I see myself on my stomach, legs under bed covers. The trash bag waits where I left it. Then the hummingbird I hold against my chest like a child, frees itself.

I won’t explain it, but hours later, when I wake, having found its way home, it flutters like dust in light, right outside my window.
Monterrey, 1981

Crowded city buses are on fire.

The boy with the guitar plays

the song about the heartbroken man

who killed his love out of jealousy.

I want to give him a coin,

but I am not convinced he is a boy.

His eyes are hard like headstones,

like those of the young delinquents

who look on and carry the apathy felt

solely by the rich.

Office workers and gravediggers throw

their lunch boxes out the window.

On the streets the faces of men and women

are soft for nightfall. I name them

and I follow their footsteps long enough

for them to know I follow.

“Go away,” they say,

“you don’t belong here,”

and I climb the bus again, finding

that my mother’s hand is no longer

holding mine.

The city takes me.

The shoes and the hats and the dying
smoke of unfinished cigarettes drag
    me into a place where the thought
    of escaping is now a young boy
    who brings fear in a song:

There is no other place but what is known.

What is known is the dead skin of our mouths.
Man At Carwash, Loop 288

You have traded the land for a bucket full of soapy-water.
Fifty cents for a tip—sometimes a little more

when the wreck
of your smile reminds someone
of what they too have abandoned.

Some do not see how your hands still grip
the plow, how your tongue
can't find the tongue to say: *Me muero.*

But we all die behind the wheel,
inside the furnaces that run cold.
We journey into mirrors
thinking no one follows.

Some of us drink from where your lips
touched the cup.
The New Racists

The mousetrap won’t let go of its prey.  
The hand that tries to save it also gets caught. 
It loses its speech.  
Now it’s a disemboweled fist.  
The cry is endless.

The cry turns to laughter swinging in the trees. 
The trees turn to blood gnawing the soft organs of the earth. 
Until blood is all there is. 
It gets cold.

In a glass of water a black hair 
snakes around ice cubes. 
The ice cubes are centuries melting. 
The black hair is the syllable that gets lost in pigsties.

The music continues in an empty house. 
You are the shadow of the house. 
Coat made for the recent corpse.
Antisong

It begins in the cellar with the mice
As blister as hoodlum as swan’s flesh
Drowsiness spurting butterflies
The stench of the homeless waking us late at night
It’s here
It’s all over
In our voices that mimic the penitentiaries
In the grease we can’t scrub off our hands
   How can it be explained
The bray of the stomach
The nagging cold
The children smuggling humiliation in their thin smiles
Where’s the kindness that can be bought

    I forget the bed pan and the outhouse
When I feel your thighs whiter than stars
Close your eyes and you’ll see
    How I caress your left breast
          Not the right one that’s empty
It has found peace in a world
    That gasps like an engine burning
Its last drop of oil

    World that can’t keep me from finding you
Even when the love that threatens me lies
    Between us
Even if we pester each other with the idea of being faithful
We are in black water
Belly flop
    Our prayer leaving the body like vomit
And like vomit generosity
Because you tell your father you love him
    To punish him
You were five and he was gone
And you truly love him
But not in the same way I want to touch you
Turn you on like a lamp
That scares away the wolves with its light
    Even if they find ways
To break their spirit in half
Into convicts into priests

Into the crippled boy who finds

His name inside a coffin
Who has given up on a simple-minded God

Who refuses to turn his lame hand into light
The light we want
The one that spreads like a lard stain
On our bodies
That covers like dark cloth

The one that the man whose eyes are gagged by black tape
Would die for
A slice of light
That spills its blood
On the pillows

On your face

Where your father’s right hand remains as shadow

In our eyes that watch the clouds disguise themselves as mountains
In this place where there’s no need to leave
Ten Disordered Recollections

1. The long necks of the giraffes

2. The unadoptable homeless poet

3. The sneeze hell sent us as a warning

4.

5. Our pubes on the leather sofa

6. The light’s fang tearing into our skin

7. Turd that kept floating after the first flush

8. Your house arrest

9.

10. Hospital, your blood, your breath
Tough Guy

My brother points with the red nipple of a cigarette to a guy sporting trendy jeans and flip flops. “Pussy,” he says. “If you open him up, you’d see he has no guts.”

When drunk, he pours milk between the legs of a beautiful girl, and licks. Then returns to a time when the sound of his name pushed him to the end of the lunch line.

Hardly anyone could pronounce it. Teachers tried to rename him.

Years later, he wants to go back. He is still crouching under the gym bleachers, trembling at the principal’s office. The boy in this bar forgets he no longer has anything to prove.

But prison breastfed him scorpions. Now when he goes out, he carries our mother’s prayer like a necklace.

On his chest, the suffering face of Christ, bloody nest for birds.
Sonnet, Bar-Hopping

Do you want to get lost in your sleep?
Go ahead, tell me how much you want it.

Tell me about the wolf and the other
middle-aged animals you want to meet.

How much do they know about your sloppy
love-making? Have you told them who you are?

What you have been? The silly tyrant
and the sex-slave; the dreamer and the dream.

You have been the repulsive fingernail
and the useless mouth that spits it clean.

Tell me: why the vomit on your sweater?
Why, fucker, do you tear at your vile skin?
Fugitive

Last night you slept next to her, and through a sliver of open curtain, you watched the strip tease of the moon.

At that hour, you wanted to be water drinking itself, not water afraid of freezing. In that quiet both of you were an abandoned project a greater mind couldn’t finish.

You’re driving now through another Texas town. Dust holding things in place like a ribcage. The light hard as granite.
Diner, 3:15 a.m.

Some days all you see are two
waitresses kissing in the mouth.

They’re done with slicing apples
into quarters, done with punctuality.

They clock-out their figures in the narrow
hall where they think no one sees them.

A night without the need of decorum
awaits them. Greetings are bundled

with aprons. Refills are spilled in the sink.
All restlessness is left on the counter,

by the stools, in the soft gaze of a traveler
who is also in search of permanence.
Stockyards

A young man rides a bicycle.

He rides into the sunlight that eases itself into convenience stores, softens the chocolate bars and the adult magazines. Housewife kissing housewife. Fishnet of despair.

No one is happy.

The married woman tries to peel the bruises off her skin. It was not supposed to be this way, but when drunk, the body is crushed by need. When it happened, the children slept, as he whispered, if you don’t answer the phone, I know you’re fucking someone else.

When it happened, she looked at the curtains tied to each other, allowing a slice of moonlight wet the sheets. But it was not moonlight. It was the thought of suicide moving like a glacier of sleeping pills. She could cut him, but knows that in the night there is but one thought, and it’s not of her. Where would she go? And the children?

No one will die here.

The subways will bring us back to the pools of winter, to where the stray dog drags its broken leg across the ice. The car could’ve killed him. Bring the wheelchair so sorrow can be weighed against sorrow.

And the dust? It gives nothing and takes everything. Everywhere else heavy lifting hacks the shoulder in two.

On the streets young laborers warm their hands with breath. They yield the only fight that’s in them and prefer to sleep. They joke about the guy big enough to pleasure himself with the mouth, and then grow quiet when one points to a sign.
they can’t read, or are suddenly reminded
that perhaps their women sleep with other men.
Their home is so far away it can only be touched
with thought. The nights are cold. Their children cry
before their first grief. The men pretend
they sit around a fire in their backyards. In my country,
one of them says, and he’s in love again.

Dusk descends, undone.

There is water here, and in my face it sees
its own reflection. The limits of our thoughts.
The toothache that made me fall in love.
The foreskin that suffocates the brain like plastic.
I ask: What’s law? And it stares at me,
startled, like one who finds a fetus
in the kitchen sink. We smile, not understanding
each other. No law, but a man in the sperm
is what enters the womb, I say. Then the sound
of the tree branch breaking. The tree coming apart
limb by limb, refusing to fall all at once.
I explain: If something calls from within,
it will not be your voice or the name you give me.

To not skin the skin I am born with.

The hatless tyrant wants a nasty whore
for a wife. He loses hair at night and every morning
he sees how his head is slowly circumcised. He is alone
when two young lovers cross the street hand in hand.
He watches them through the scope of his rifle.
The bullet believes in mercy. It brings them summer.
The tyrant commands the birds to tear the music
out of their bodies. They find only blood.
With no wife and no brother to betray,
the hatless man makes small gifts out of jails.
He sends them to his mistress, his friends,
the young prostitute who refuses to be whore.
Finally, the tyrant castrates himself with boredom.
But the pillow is pitiless. No hope that proper
names will be given back to corpses.

Who executes the executioner?
Frail hands braid the noose
this morning. Newborns wear exile
like a dirty coat. If their cry is nursed
by silence, then they will grow up
to sweep the streets, to build the homes
of those who hate them.
They want to crawl back into blackness,
the liquid without lungs,
lungs without memory of air.

In the distance, now without bicycle,
the young man begins to harness
night’s slender horses.
His work eats into the bone.

When done,
he walks to where I am.
I can see his arms. He carries the omen
we look for in the guts of pigs.
It’s there.
Supplication

It’s time.
It’s late.
The ambulance is quiet.
Hotel beds are heavy with bodies.
Come.
Take my hand
and guide me into your dream.
You’ve done enough
and the night needs the prayer
of your sleep.
Our lives can wait
one more hour.
Trust me,
our obsessions won’t go away.
Before daybreak, they’ll wait
for us in the kitchen,
bringing a fresh cup of coffee
to their lips.
“Good morning,” they’ll exclaim,
ecstatic because we can’t forget them.

It’s late.
Even the petty thief knows
the time has come to bless
the fruit of his labor.
The lost find stars in the sky.
And even those who wanted
to remain anonymous
are giving up their names.