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Entre países

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Entre Países

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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
English Department

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ORIGINAL POEMS

Long Live the Confederacy

I am a child.
I am a beautiful little Tennessee boy in the summer
with peanut butter in my mouth my skin smells
like Soddy Lake
my beautiful little Tennessee ass is crisp white
as the last page of the Bible and no one
is protecting me.

I'm dripping peach juice on a
polo shirt my mama has too many dogs
meanwhile folks are creeping through the desert
 creeping into my country
 into my backyard here they come
here they are dogs are barking
hide your peaches
no one
is protecting me.

A billboard went up in a language I don't read
and no one is protecting me.

The lottery system in our public schools is a scary thing
because kids from the South Side might end up in
my North Shore classroom and no one is protecting
me.

I'm eating dinner with my grandparents
 on Thanksgiving or Christmas Eve
and my grandfather is saying things that fit better in
his grandfather's mouth
his grandfather's time
and then he's choking
on his turkey or his potatoes or his apple pie
the navy tattoos on his chest heaving and he spits
and downs a Dr. Pepper
and blames the whole damn thing on the Mexicans
and no one is protecting me.

In my neighborhood there are statues
built on the wrong side of the civil war
 we learn their names in
 school we visit them on
 field trips no one is
 protecting me.

I am a beautiful little Tennessee boy in the summer and it's hot
as hell
and the sweat on Tennessee brows only comes in
two colors
and *goddamn boy ain't you glad you got the right one* why
is no one protecting me?

I grew up between these mountains in the shadows where you still hear the 400-year-old echoes
of
white mouths using the N-word aloud I hear it
in my sleep and no one is protecting me.

I am a child.

I don't yet know to be afraid of that Confederate flag
and no one is protecting me.

De Michoacán

When my wife was five I think
she walked the Sonoran Desert.

Thirty-eight pounds and too heavy for
los pinches coyotes to carry and so

she burned her small feet
in the sand. For twelve years

after she danced on scarred soles numb
I met her

at the ballet she said it was her way
out. Ninety-seven pounds now,

too heavy for her pinche esposo
to carry there is no way out

this story is not about me it is
her standing tall still fire burning

still, hot beneath her small and beautiful
toes.

**Algún día mi esposa volará,
y nunca he pensado en eso.**

Aunque siempre conocía su cara
de alondra, sus alas rapiditas,
olvidé mis propios brazos
cortos, mis manos sin pluma, estas
pinches piernas pesadas.

Me quedo con un jarrito de semillas.
Practico chiflar cada día.
Miro al viento, parado al precipicio,
pienso en ello, pienso en ello.

**Someday my wife will fly, oh,
but I never thought.**

Although I always knew her lark's
cheeks, her swift wings, tiny,
I forgot my own short arms,
these featherless hands and these
damned heavy legs.

I keep a small jar of seeds.
I practice whistling every day.
I look at the wind, lean over the edge,
I think about it, I think about it.

**Con el tiempo me pregunto
cuáles son las razones.**

Como la de volver a la montaña
a buscar a mí mismo. Girando
entre arboles con los ojos cubiertos
y una flor al corazón. Pienso
en el espacio entre dos

países. Pienso que una niña podría
ser violada y después deportada.
Pasará noviembre, con el tiempo,
me pregunto del calor de la temporada.

**In time, I wonder
what are the reasons?**

The reason for returning to the mountain,
chasing after myself? Searching
between trees—eyes covered
and a flower to the heart. I think
about the space between

nations. I think that a girl could be
raped and then deported.
November will pass, in time,
I wonder at the heat of the season.

**Como una bandada de aves
en mayo, nos cuidaremos.**

Ya que su familia es mía, ya
que trato de tragar su lengua.
En una pequeña iglesia bailamos
y nos besamos, toqué su cabeza
y su pelo, casi negro.

Lo quiero seguir hasta las raíces.
Quiero entender sus principios.
Ya que viene la primavera otra vez,
regresamos del Sur con las aves.

**Like a flock of birds in May,
we will care for one another.**

Now that her family is mine, now,
as I try to swallow her tongue.
In a tiny church we danced and
we kissed, I touched her head
and her hair, nearly black.

I want to follow it to the roots.
I want to know her beginnings.
Now that spring comes again,
we fly north with the birds.

**Escenas de tortura:
una fiesta.**

Cumpleaños de un niño, estamos
cantando. Cuando nos pregunta
le decimos otra vez—está de viaje,
tu papá, está de viaje en México,
no sé cuándo, no sé cuándo...

Y el blanco del pastel
brilla bajo de las velas.
Y la sonrisa del niño
brilla.

**Scenes of torture:
a fiesta.**

Young boy's birthday, we're
singing. When he asks, we will
tell him again—he's on vacation,
your papá, he's on vacation in México,
I don't know when, I don't know when...

And the white cake shines
beneath the candles' light.
And the young boy's smile
shines.

De Michoacán

Perhaps the desert is more romantic but in truth
she crossed a bridge in a sedan.

In the backseat she practiced
another five-year-old's name—

border patrol can't tell a María
from a Guadalupe. Makes it

too easy for a migrant girl to forget
which she was born to:

María, or Guadalupe. Makes it too easy
for a poet to fill in the wrong blank

and tell the wrong story mistake
the wrong stamp

on the wrong passport for a blessing,
a lemon in the desert turned over but

sucked dry already by passing monarchs.

Daily Bread

It was in the little bakery on the bluff, where I go for a loaf each week, and I was there, moving from one bread rack to the next, looking for the right loaf for the week ahead. He was there, too, sitting on the floor as I came around the last rack, a young man, and he had a wrapped loaf of sourdough in his left hand and his face buried in his right. 'Bread troubles?' I asked him. He looked up at me and his cheeks were very wet. 'No,' he said, 'the sourdough is just fine, it always is just fine.' I just said 'Oh,' and looked for a while at his wet face. 'It's just that I lost my father when I was very young,' he said, and he suddenly looked to be very young, like a child, 'the government gave him a free ride back to Guatemala and I never saw him again.' I had been to Guatemala once, or just to the border, so I said, 'I've been to Guatemala, well, just to the border, really, to the river there. Maybe I saw your father?' He shook his head, 'They told me he jumped into that river, when he could not come home to us, he jumped in and it carried him away to the ocean.' I sat on the floor next to him, leaned my back on the tiled wall. Our faces reflected strangely in the stainless steel bread rack. I told him, 'The state of New Jersey gave my father a cancer. I watched him turn to dust, and then he, too, floated away on a river.' I studied the strange reflection, and saw that I had also become like a child.

What Is Left

His scarred hands held my head once, that I can remember—gently poured warm water as he taught me to drag a razor across my scalp. He was built of clean edges, swept-up floors, plumb walls and a roof at the proper angle. His rusted folding chair is still there on my porch, where he would sit and point, and I would obey. Our renovations are not yet done, we've already sold the trailer where he slept as his lungs fell away. I've already hauled his wrecked motorcycle in the back of his work truck to park it here, beneath the deck. His body went the way of his lungs, his scarred hands all that he left for me. I put them on to drive nails and cut lumber to length. They touch my scalp again and again, they feel for stubble in front of a dirty bathroom mirror. They hide my eyes.

Death and Other Delusions

It would have been better had he gone in his sleep. Had I touched his quiet head and said something normal, Father are you Afraid? He would not have known what to say—for the morphine, the sleep. Father do you Regret? Only morphine, only sleep. I chased him until the end, tailing always after that blue specter motorbike. Back and forth across the city bridges. It would have been better had that hospital gown not flapped so in the wind, had his naked body not winked at me from underneath. I could have said something, Father, Anything. He rode fast and laughed loudly, he left a trail of thin white hairs drifting.

Paradise, TN

Naked and fatherless am I, soft on the grass, and the newborn sun reaching down, and so many cats sleeping about. I believe that God planted—by her own righteous hand—these hundred crepe myrtle trees, that she grew for me this shade magnolia. So many larks, which visit the heavy flowers on one small mountain and then the next. Whole and shameless am I. My skin in the air as easy as wind chimes, where the ferns rustle, always. She planted for me a peace lily—yet, just a lily—and a berry plant to feed me. A round stone pool to wash me. Perfect and innocent am I, looking at the southern sky and wondering what is rain, and wondering what bloody part of me I would cut away to have with me my wife in this garden.

Comparative Analyses

There have always been two sides. For instance, this: our house. We have an inside, an outside. It doesn't much matter except that we keep our money and our clothes inside and leave our friends and recycling without. It's mostly good to have friends, but they too have two sides. Left and right. Two is not that many to keep up with, but if they get them confused it becomes very hard to communicate directions. How would they get to the post office? The post office has two sides—the top and bottom. You don't usually see the bottom, they keep it underground like a government secret. The government even has two sides! As do secrets!

Señal

In México, they buried my good friend's abuelos. Los enterraron en una ciudad de veintitrés millones, none of whom are my good friend. Con sus teléfonos, they buried them, y cuando esté triste mi buen amigo, los llama, y le cuentan las historias de su tierra. Es bueno, creo yo, to hold onto one's cell phone in death. When my good friend graduates from college, los va a llamar, celebrarán todos juntos. Ay, cuando nazca su primera hija, que van a llorar y llorar de felicidad, de escuchar su pequeña voz. And, cuando llegue la migra con su cloak and scythe, los puede avisar, and they will make ready for him a space in between.

Politics

I asked the Capitol Police for my notebook and despite the rules they gave it to me and so I began to write a poem about lemons. I was trying really trying to find a way to say sour without saying sour but my wrists were bound and so my brain didn't work and then there was the man beside me who kept wanting to tell me stories which were about politics and not at all about lemons. Just when I thought I had it a new officer came to tell me that notebooks were not allowed so I told him that I was writing a poem about lemons and he said that poems about lemons were against policy as well and then he took my notebook away again. Now I am out on bail and trying to finish my lemon poem and I think that 'political' is the best synonym for sour and I wish that I had paid more attention to the man's stories or to politics. My wrists are untied now but my brain still doesn't work and there are no bars on my window but there are bars on the surface of my eyeballs and so I peer between them everywhere I look.

outside is the same
the bars do taste of lemons
once twice many times

Te Digo

Aquí en el Sur cada
calle sigue al río o va
directamente a la iglesia—
aquí
en el Sur donde nacimos
donde crecimos donde
se mueren nuestros padres
todos aquí
en el Sur
sudamos
nos mojamos
aquí en los ríos
 siempre siguen a las calles
se mueren los padres
al fin siempre está
la iglesia

I Tell You

Here in the South every
road follows the river or goes
directly to church—
here
in the South where we are born
where we grow
our fathers die
all of us here
in the South
we sweat
we dip ourselves
here in the rivers
 they always follow the roads
our fathers die
and at the end is always
the church

Could Be Anything

But it is my wife, again
mowing the lawn. And it is so
loud. I am too disturbed
to help, too distracted by the birds
to write another poem.

It really could be
anything but
it's summertime in Tennessee
which really means late
September, and I am too busy
with the crepe myrtles
blooming again, they are so loud.

Lo Que Pasa

Es que en mi mente ya
estamos libre
regreso del mercado
 con flores y mango
y digo vámonos amor
que Oaxaca nos espera

y talvez me dice que sí

pero ponemos las flores en la jarra
cortamos el mango y lo comemos afuera
y nos sentamos juntos
en la sala
tranquilos
solos
 la luna vuela
y todavía
dormidos

It Goes Like This

It's that in my mind we
are already free I
come home from the market
 with flowers and mango
and say vámonos amor
Oaxaca awaits

and maybe she says yes

but we put the flowers in a jar
cut the mango and eat it outside
and sit together
in the den
quiet
alone
 the moon soars
and still
sleeping

*Desde lo alto de su morenía una isleña me mira,
esbelta catedral vestida de luz.
-Octavio Paz*

She lives in una casa deshabitada, with
shot dogs and naked
skulls.

In her sleep, her bare flesh glows y todos
los insectos vienen a ver, a tocar, a
probar.

With her tongue
she shatters el espejo en her throat
just as I begin to taste myself in it,

with her tongue, she recreates *El Origen
de la Vida*
en sangre

on my thighs. With

her tongue

she lures another roach, crushes another roach,
empieza a reír una virgen otra vez patitas
ondeando entre sus dientes y ella me mira.

A mí,
me mira, a shot dog, calavera desnuda, insecto crawling
under the door to die in her mouth again, me mira.

La cola se manea, and dizzy blood falls from my wounds.

Come, she says, con su lengua she beckons, and I do.

4th of July

I

she is submersed in this
desert bath swimming
among coyotes who howl
when her braids
tangle
in the brush

II

when the fireworks begin
they do not sound as
she imagined
the eagle's heavy wing
but rather
—just over the Arizona line—
like a small lark beating
against an even
smaller
cage

Power of Attorney

Sitting for hours in
a doorway looking
across the line
to a twisted tree heavy
with pink flowers
greeting immigrant
parents come to sign
the papers
so that if they when they
are deported
their children might begin
to turn themselves
inside-out and fill
every hidden cavity with
shame and spill their
red tears inwards
in a classroom setting
or an after school activity
and not on the street.

Economía Política de la Migración – 27 sept 2018

- La migración internacional es lo que define nuestro tiempo.
- Es parte del proceso de globalización, y se relaciona con los flujos de comerciales, capital, y conocimiento.
- México es un país de destino y tránsito de la migración internacional, pero es principalmente el país de origen de millones de migrantes en los Estados Unidos.
- Pues,
- ya tengo estas notas.
- Ya las tomé en el jardín comunitario de Highland Park, donde crecen frutas, vegetales, y miedo de extranjeros.
- Ya las tomé, cuando mi esposa se sentó en mis caderas, lloró hasta el fin,
- cuando se sentó ella en la tina, se durmió en agua fría, se despertó invisible.
- Escribí mucho la noche que mi hermana dejó su carro—llanta pinchada—allí en la carretera;
- tuvo miedo de que las autoridades vinieran para ofrecerle su ayuda.
- Aquí, una cita de mi sobrino, la primera llamada de México:
 “¿Viste a mi papá? ¿Le dijiste hola para mí?”
- Anteriormente, me ha dicho, “Quiero ir contigo, *ya tengo mis papeles.*”
- Ya tomé estas pinches notas, cada vez que el gobierno me paga otro semestre y no le da nada a mi hermano.
- Las tomé durante horas afuera de la cárcel capital,
- durante años con mi abuelo, racista,
- durante un momento singular, de rodilla en la regadera.
- En el aeropuerto el año pasado, no marcaron con pluma la boleta de mi esposa, y pensó ella que sería el último adiós.

Dice el maestro:

- Tenemos que combatir la criminalidad de la frontera.

Dice:

- ¿Quién sabe que va a pasar?

Political Economy of Migration – 27 Sept 2018

- International migration is what defines our time.
- It is part of the process of globalization, related to the flow of goods, capital, and knowledge.
- México is a country of destination and of transit for international migration, but is principally the country of origin for millions of migrants in the United States.
- But—
- I already have these notes.
- I took them already in the Highland Park community garden, where fruits, vegetables, and the fear of foreigners grow.
- I took them already, when my wife sat herself down on my hips, cried until the very end, when she lowered herself into the tub, fell asleep in cold water, woke up invisible.
- I wrote much the night my sister left her car—tire flat—there on the highway;
- she was afraid of the authorities coming to offer her their help.
- And here, a quote from my nephew, the first call from México:
 “Did you see my dad? Did you tell him hello for me?”
- Earlier, he had told me, “I want to go with you, *I have my papers.*”
- I already took these goddamn notes, each time the government pays me another semester and doesn’t give shit to my brother.
- I took them in the hours outside the capitol jail,
- in the years with my racist grandfather,
- in one singular moment in the shower on my knees.
- Last year in the airport, they didn’t mark my wife’s ticket with their blue pen, and she thought it would be our final goodbye.

The professor says:

- We must combat the criminalization of the border.

He says:

- Who knows what happens next?

Highrise

You might kick a framing nail
over, lean forward and watch it
slip through the Tennessee
heat, you might
shit your overalls at a gust
off the mountains to the west.

You might dangle one boot, think
about your father's eternal fall.
You might close your eyes, think
about following him.

You might feel his hand again
at the back of your neck, hear
him singing like when you
were a child.

No Hay Ninguna

ciudad que te puede ensuciar.
No me importa el país.

No hay ninguna canción que
me pueda doler tanto.

No hay pájaro en el cielo ni
diablo en ese río, ni

un ángel en cualquier barrio.
No me digas que no.

No hay pintura aquí como has
pintado mis pulmones de azul.

There Is No

city that could dirty you.
It doesn't matter the nation.

There is no song that
could hurt me so much.

There is no bird in the sky nor
devil in that river, nor

an angel in any barrio.
Do not tell me otherwise.

There is no painting here like you
have painted my lungs so blue.

Longing for My Father

Like the walnut by the road's edge, cut
now into slabs for the garden path,
like the sun that sits on the Chickamauga late
into the summer night,
like that damned river that flows on
when I look away,
like the heat that radiates from the darkened earth,
reaches to envelop the moon,
like the tomato plant that grows untended,
that leaves its fruit on the ground,
that withers and grows again,
something on the wind tells me, and
like the morning vole in the red hawk's shadow,
I cower.

Window Scene

I learned to tell the seasons by
sawdust smell, is it in
the shop, the yard? If my father
touches the top of my head,
his fingers will be hot or cold
or maybe made of ash.
He taught me how to build a house
and then I built one.
I planted 100 crepe myrtle trees
in the yard. Now, everything
smells like sawdust, so I count
the purple blooms again,
is it spring? Is it fall?
I count the purple blooms again.

A Cut in the Hand

When I encounter my father's
ghost, I'm certain it will be
Texas. I will know him—the only other
motorcycle on that long highway
route to Oaxaca,
that trip we started in a hospital room.

I might look at the scar on my palm.
Think about my nephew, fatherless as I.
We may even be (my father's ghost
and I) mere miles from the cell
in which my brother-in-law slept
awaiting his deportation.

If I reopen that old wound I am certain
it will be to let blood into
the sand, an apology for having found
my father again: my nephew
still wonders.

Letting Go

It's like going to the hardware store—
standing between the $\frac{1}{4}$ and the $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
ceiling panels and making a decision
for the first time without crying
into your hands because your father
who was a carpenter and who bore
an infection of the lungs into the
heart of the crematorium flame is no
longer a phone call away to tell you
which one you need. It's like driving
his truck with the windows down singing
his favorite country love songs loudly.
It's like holding on to your sister
with his hands and watching her grow
through his fatherly eyes, building
your first home with his hammer and his
dwindling boxes of nails. It's like
writing a poem for a stranger and then
setting it on fire and then quickly
stamping it out because it's important
that someone read at least the few words
left between your ashes.

Otra Amante

Algo de la flor que brota en enero—
del pajarito que llora de noche y
de vuelo. El sabor de tu piel, olor
de tu pelo, más que todo tus manos,
tus dedos...

Perdóname si cierro los ojos,
si te agarro mientras te besa la bella
tristeza, no digo nada.

En mi pecho sangriento entierro semilla.
Crece y florece, parto las costillas, entierro otra.
Crecen y florecen. Como canción, hacen
el día, como estrellas se aman por noche.

Perdóname. Duermes todavía
en los brazos de la tristeza. Me siento al patio,
chiflando con los pájaros por la madrugada
y después.

Another Lover

Something of the january bloom—
of the bird that cries out for the night and
for flight. The taste of your skin, scent
of your hair, most of all your hands,
your fingers...

Forgive me if I close my eyes,
if I grasp for you while you brush lips
with your beautiful sadness.

In my bloody chest I bury a seed.
It grows and it flowers, I part my ribcage, bury another.
They grow and they flower. Like song, they begin
the day, like stars they love through the night.

Forgive me. Still you sleep
in the arms of your sadness. I stay on the porch,
whilstling with the birds through the morning
and beyond.

Farewell to Tennessee

Goodbye Rockytop, Grand Ol' Opry, goodbye
Smokey Mountain banjo tunes,
goodbye purple iris and your yellow
heart. Goodbye forest that sings, river
which cries. Goodbye tall clouds that
light the valley with a flame,
at night in July. Oh, the South will
fuck with you in ways you'd never imagine,
goodbye to the momentous barn owl that
wakes and is gone, to all the lovers in
Chattanooga, how they love, to the
homemade chocolates in little boxes at
the Sunday market. Goodbye, old man,
carving little wooden dogs on the church
step. Goodbye Tennessee, I remember you
fondly, I hope to return never more.

**Entre mi niñez (tan larga)
y los muslos de mi esposa (elegantes, ilegales)**

Entre aguas,
entre países,
entre balseros
con zapatos
inundados, entre
las alas
de una
monarca muerta
por el
frio, entre
dos senos
alimentando a
dos niñitos,
alimentando a
dos dioses
pequeños, entre
las dos
mil flamitas
de una
iglesia entre
montañas, encontré
el olor
de mí
propio hogar.

Olía a
mi río,
a mis
montañas, al
mismo bosque
cortado, al
mismo pulmón
negro de
carbón. Por
mi nariz,
el mismo
Sur. Olía
a turistas
(que parecían
a mí)
mirando a
las mujeres
alimentando (que

parecían a
mi mujer),
a sus
niñitos (que
parecían a
mis niños),
preguntándose “¿y
la gallina,
matada en
el piso
de la
iglesia?” y
yo también,
preguntándome.

**Between my childhood (how long)
and my wife's thighs (elegant, illegal)**

Between waters,
between countries,
between balseros
with flooded
boots, between
the wings
of a
monarch dead
of the
cold, between
two breasts
feeding two
tiny sons,
feeding two
tiny gods
between the
two thousand
flames of
a church
between mountains,
I caught
the scent
of my
Tennessee home.

Scent of
my river,
of my
mountains, of
my own
cut forest,
my own
carbon-black
lung. To
my nose,
the same
South. Scent
of tourists
(so very
like myself)
staring at
the women
feeding (so

very like
my woman)
their tiny
sons (so
very like
my own
tiny sons),
wondering, “and
the hen,
broken against
the floor
of the
church?” and
I, also,
am wondering.

Homelands

A child is born
in the Tennessee River.
His mother cuts out his heart
with garden shears and
buries it in the shade.
A purple iris grows.

Heavy rains keep the river
moving, the waters that remember
the baby boy drift away.

Hummingbirds that came in the spring
leave by the fall. The boy's mother frets
over ants in the sugar water.

A child plays in the yard, barefoot,
mulch collects in his hair.
He presses his ear to one bloom
after another, he laughs when
he finds the one that softly beats.
He takes a leaf to remember.

Fruit trees grow by the window.
The way the squirrels leave peach pits
in the drive might mean something,

the way they lean from the edge of the gutter
and drop them so carefully down,
and hide their eyes when caught in the act.

A child goes to work with his father,
builds one house and then another.
The swing of the hammer sounds
something like his flower, he carries
lumber like a grown man, he falls
asleep in the truck again.

There have never not been mountains,
not as long as the boy has lived.
They hold his family in the center,

they watch from all sides: his mother
in the garden, his father on the roof, the boy
teaches his brothers to read in the sun.

A child fights with his father. He tears
out one bloom after another, but cannot
find his beating heart. His mother has planted
milkweed and the monarchs bat at
his eyes with their wings. A child cries,
and his mother cries too.

The river and the rain cycle through
the valley, the water that remembers the
boy will pass by again. He sits

on the bank with a girl, they wet their
bare feet and watch for it to come.
The hummingbirds watch for it to come.

A child thinks often about his flower.
He wants to give a girl more than
the soil in his chest. He won't rip up
his mother's garden again, and even she
does not know where to dig, or
where to tilt her watering can.

The oak tree behind the house falls,
the boy cuts it into small pieces while
his father sleeps and grows thinner.

His mother turns on the stove and turns
it off again, the water in the pot never boils.
The flowers in the garden wilt.

A child marries in the winter. The cold
is a secret part of it. The mountains keep
the sun's hand from the garden they plant,
red plastic roses will do for now. They fall
asleep sitting up on the living room couch,
she covers his eyes with her fingertips.

The boy is at work when his father catches fire.
By the time he arrives, his father is no more
than a scorch mark on the place

where his infant son's heart was buried. Another
new flower may grow, in the spring, the boy and
his bride wonder what it may be.

A child carries an urn into the river,
overturns it and becomes a man.
The river waters don't recognize
the man, but they draw grey ash into
the current just the same, carry it away
like a memory, or a hummingbird.

TRANSLATIONS
of
OCTAVIO PAZ &
ROSARIO CASTELLANOS

La Calle

Octavio Paz

Es una calle larga y silenciosa.
Ando en tinieblas y tropiezo y caigo
y me levanto y piso con pies ciegos
las piedras mudas y las hojas secas
y alguien detrás de mí también las pisa:
si me detengo, se detiene;
si corro, corre. Vuelvo el rostro: nadie.
Todo está oscuro y sin salida,
y doy vueltas y vueltas en esquinas
que dan siempre a la calle
donde nadie me espera ni me sigue,
donde yo sigo a un hombre que tropieza
y se levanta y dice al verme: nadie.

The Street

It is a long and quiet street.
I go in darkness and stumble and fall
and pick myself up and I step with blind feet on
the quiet rocks and dried leaves
and someone behind me steps on them too:
if I pause, he pauses,
if I run, he runs. I turn to look: nobody.
It is all dark and endless,
and I turn and turn at each corner,
but turn always back to the same street,
where nobody waits for me, nor follows me,
where I follow a man who stumbles
and picks himself up and says as he turns to me: nobody.

Ni el Cielo Ni la Tierra

Octavio Paz

Atrás el cielo,
atrás la luz y su navaja,
atrás los muros de salitre,
atrás las calles que dan siempre a otras calles.

Atrás mi piel de vidrios erizados,
atrás mis uñas y mis dientes
caídos en el pozo del espejo.
Atrás la puerta que se cierra,
el cuerpo que se abre.
Atrás, amor encarnizado,
pureza que destruye,
garras de seda, labios de ceniza.

Atrás, tierra o cielo.

Sentados en las mesas
donde beben la sangre de los pobres:
la mesa del dinero,
la mesa de la gloria y de la justicia,
la mesa del poder y la mesa de Dios
la Sagrada Familia en su Pesebre,
la Fuente de la Vida,
el espejo quebrado en que Narciso
a sí mismo se bebe y no se sacia
y el hígado, alimento de profetas y buitres...

Atrás, tierra o cielo.

Cohabitando escondidos
en sábanas insomnes,
cuerpos de cas y yeso,
piedras, cenizas ateridas
cuando la luz los toca;
y las tumbas de piedras o palabras,
la torre de Babel en comandita
y el cielo que bosteza
y el infierno mordiéndose la cola
y la resurrección
y el día de la vida perdurable
el día sin crepúsculo,
el paraíso visceral del feto.

Creía en todo esto.
Hoy canto solo
a la orilla del llanto.
También el llanto sirve de almohada.

Not the Heavens nor the Earth

Behind the heavens,
 behind the light and her razor,
 behind the saltpeter walls,
 behind the streets that turn always to other streets.

Behind my shattered glass skin,
 behind my nails and my teeth,
 fallen in the mirror's well.
 Behind the door that closes,
 the body that breaks open.
 Behind, bitter love,
 ruinous purity,
 silken talons, ashen lips.

Behind, earth or heavens.

Seated at the tables
 where they drink the blood of the poor:
 the table of wealth,
 the table of glory and of justice,
 the table of power and the table of God
 —the Holy Family 'round the Manger,
 the Source of all Life,
 the fractured mirror in which Narcissus
 drinks of himself but never satiates
 and the liver, food for prophets and for vultures...

Behind, earth or heavens.

Hidden together
 in sleepless sheets,
 bodies of lime and plaster,
 stones, ashes frozen
 at the touch of the light;
 and the tombs of stones and of words,
 the Tower of Babel together
 and the yawning heavens
 and the hell that chews its own tail
 and the resurrection
 and the day of eternal life
 and the day without dusk,
 the visceral paradise of the fetus.

Visitas

Octavio Paz

A través de la noche urbana de piedra y sequía
 entra el campo a mi cuarto.
 Alarga brazos verdes con pulseras de pájaros,
 con pulseras de hojas.
 Lleva un río de la mano.
 El cielo del campo también entra,
 con su cesta de joyas acabadas de cortar.
 Y el mar se sienta junto a mí,
 extendiendo su cola blanquísima en el suelo.
 Del silencio brota un árbol de música.
 Del árbol cuelgan todas las palabras hermosas
 que brillan, maduran, caen.
 En mi frente, cueva que habita un relámpago...
 Pero todo se ha poblado de alas.

You Visit

Through the dry stone urban night
 the country enters my bedroom.
 Her green arms extend with bangles of birds,
 leafy bracelets.
 She carries a river in her palm.
 The country sky enters too,
 with her basket of jewels freshly cut.
 And the sea sits herself beside me,
 extending her tail, so white, to the floor.
 A tree of music grows in the silence.
 From the tree hangs every beautiful word,
 which glisten, mature, and fall silent.
 At my brow, a cave full of lightning...
 But all has drifted in on wings.

Antes del Comienzo

Octavio Paz

Ruidos confusos, claridad incierta
Otro día comienza.
Es un cuarto en penumbra
y dos cuerpos tendidos.
En mi frente me pierdo
por un llano sin nadie.
Ya las horas afilan sus navajas.
Pero a mi lado tú respiras;
entrañable y remota
fluyes y no te mueves.
Inaccesible si te pienso,
con los ojos te palpo,
te miro con las manos.
Los sueños nos separan
y la sangre nos junta:
somos un río de latidos.
Bajo tus párpados madura
la semilla del sol.

El mundo
no es real todavía,
el tiempo duda:
sólo es cierto
el calor de tu piel.
En tu respiración escucho
la marea del ser,
la sílaba olvidada del Comienzo.

Before the Beginning

Amid muddled noise, misty clarity,
 another day begins.
 The room is half-lit,
 two bodies lying.
 In my mind I lose myself
 on a plain all alone.
 Already the hours sharpen their edges.
 But by my side you breathe;
 both near and distant
 you ebb and do not move,
 inaccessible if I think of you,
 with my eyes I feel you,
 with my hands I watch you.
 Separated by dreams,
 joined by blood:
 we are a river of heartbeats.
 Beneath your eyelids now ripens
 the seed of the sun.

The world

still is not real.
 Time doubts:
 all that is true is
 the heat of your skin.
 In your breathing I hear
 the tide of being,
 the forgotten syllable of the Beginning.

Aquí

Octavio Paz

Mis pasos en esta calle
resuenan
en otra calle
donde
oigo mis pasos
pasar en esta calle
donde

sólo es real la niebla.

Here

My footsteps on this street
echo
on another street
where
I hear my footsteps
stepping on this street
where

the mist is the only reality.

Agua Nocturna

Octavio Paz

La noche de ojos de caballo que tiemblan en la noche,
la noche de ojos de agua en el campo dormido,
está en tus ojos de caballo que tiembla,
está en tus ojos de agua secreta.

Ojos de agua de sombra,
ojos de agua de pozo,
ojos de agua de sueño.

El silencio y la soledad,
como dos pequeños animales a quienes guía la luna,
beben en esos ojos,
beben en esas aguas.

Si abres los ojos,
se abre la noche de puertas de musgo,
se abre el reino secreto del agua
que mana del centro de la noche.

Y si los cierras,
un río, una corriente dulce y silenciosa,
te inunda por dentro, avanza, te hace oscura:
la noche moja riberas en tu alma.

Night Water

The night of horse eyes, trembling in the night,
the night of water eyes in the sleeping country,
it trembles in your horse eyes,
in your secret water eyes.

Shade water eyes,
well water eyes,
dream water eyes.

Silence and solitude,
like two tiny animals guided by the moon,
drink from those eyes,
drink from those waters.

If you open the eyes,
the mossy doors of night open,
the secret realm of water opens
that flows from the center of the night.

And if you close them,
a river, a current sweet and silent,
floods you, advances, darkens you:
the night wets the shores of your soul.

El Otro

Rosario Castellanos

¿Por qué decir nombres de dioses, astros
 espumas de un océano invisible,
 polen de los jardines más remotos?
 Si nos duele la vida, si cada día llega
 desgarrando la entraña, si cada noche cae
 convulsa, asesinada.
 Si nos duele el dolor en alguien, en un hombre
 al que no conocemos, pero está
 presente a todas horas y es la víctima
 y el enemigo y el amor y todo
 lo que nos falta para ser enteros.
 Nunca digas que es tuya la tiniebla,
 no te bebas de un sorbo la alegría.
 Mira a tú alrededor: hay otro, siempre hay otro.
 Lo que él respira es lo que a ti te asfixia,
 lo que come es tu hambre.
 Muere con la mitad más pura de tu muerte.

The Other

Why speak the names of gods, foaming
 stars in invisible oceans,
 pollen of the most remote gardens?
 If life wounds us, if each day breaks
 tearing at the heart, if each night falls
 convulsing, murdered.
 If pain in any man pains us, in a man
 who we never met, but who is
 there through all hours and is the victim
 and the enemy and the lover and all
 that we lack to be whole.
 Never say that the darkness is yours,
 do not swallow a sip of happiness.
 Look around you: there is another, always another.
 That which he breathes suffocates you,
 that which he eats, starves you.
 He dies the purest part of your death.

Agonía Fuera del Muro

Rosario Castellanos

Miro las herramientas,
El mundo que los hombres hacen, donde se afanan,
Sudan, paren, cohabitan.

El cuerpo de los hombres prensado por los días,
Su noche de ronquido y de zarpazo
Y las encrucijadas en que se reconocen.

Hay ceguera y el hambre los alumbra
Y la necesidad, más dura que metales.

Sin orgullo (¿qué es el orgullo? ¿Una vértebra
Que todavía la especie no produce?)
Los hombres roban, mienten,
Como animal de presa olfatean, devoran
Y disputan a otro la carroña.

Y cuando bailan, cuando se deslizan
O cuando burlan una ley o cuando
Se envilecen, sonríen,
Entornan levemente los párpados, contemplan
El vacío que se abre en sus entrañas
Y se entregan a un éxtasis vegetal, inhumano.

Yo soy de alguna orilla, de otra parte,
Soy de los que no saben ni arrebatar ni dar,
Gente a quien compartir es imposible.

No te acerques a mi, hombre que haces el mundo,
Déjame, no es preciso que me mates.
Yo soy de los que mueren solos, de los que mueren
De algo peor que vergüenza.
Yo muero de mirarte y no entender.

Agony Beyond the Wall

I look at the tools.
The world built by men, where they toil,
sweat, are born, live.

The men's bodies compressed by the days,
the snoring and scratching night
and the crossroads where they meet one another.

There is blindness, and hunger reveals them,
and poverty, unforgiving as iron.

Without pride (what is pride? A vertebra
that man has yet to evolve?)
the men steal, lie,
track like predators, devour,
fight over the carrion.

And when they dance, when they glide
or when they cheat the law or when
they debase themselves, they smile,
half close their eyes, contemplate
the space that opens in their gut
and they enter a vegetable bliss, inhuman.

I am of some shore, some other part,
I am of those who know not how to take nor to give,
people with whom to share is impossible.

Do not draw near to me, man who constructs the world,
leave me, there is no need to kill me.
I am of those who die alone, of those who die
of something worse than shame.
I die of looking at you, and not understanding.

Desamor

Rosario Castellanos

Me vio como se mira al través de un cristal
o del aire
o de nada.

Y entonces supe: yo no estaba allí
ni en ninguna otra parte
ni había estado nunca ni estaría.

Y fui como el que muere en la epidemia,
sin identificar, y es arrojado
al la fosa común.

Unloved

I saw myself as if through a crystal
or from the air
or from nothing.

And then I knew: I was not there
nor in any other place
nor had I been nor would I be.

I was as the man who dies of the plague,
unidentified, and is tossed
into the common grave.

Lo Cotidiano

Rosario Castellanos

Para el amor, no hay cielo, amor, sólo este día;
 este cabello triste que se cae
 cuando tú estás peinando ante el espejo.
 Esos túneles largos
 que se atraviesan con jadeo y asfixia;
 las paredes sin ojos,
 el hueco que resuena
 de alguna voz oculta y sin sentido.

Para el amor no hay tregua, amor. La noche
 se vuelve, de pronto, respirable.
 Y cuando un astro rompe sus cadenas
 y lo ves zigzaguear, loco, y perderse,
 no por ello la ley suelta sus garfios.
 El encuentro es a oscuras. En el beso se mezcla
 el sabor de las lágrimas.
 Y en el abrazo ciñes
 el recuerdo de aquella orfandad, de aquella muerte.

The Everyday

For love, there is no heaven, my love, only today;
 the sorrowful hairs that fall
 when you brush before the mirror.
 Those long tunnels
 that cut themselves short, gasping and choking,
 the eyeless walls,
 the hollow that echoes
 some hidden and unfeeling voice.

For love there is no respite, my love. The night
 returns suddenly, breathable.
 And when a star breaks its chains
 and you see it zigzag, insane, and lose itself,
 for that the law does not retract its claws.
 The encounter is always dark. In the kiss is mixed
 the flavor of tears.
 And in the embrace you cling to
 the memory of that orphanhood, of that death.

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English Department Thesis

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POETRY CRAFT ESSAY

The Poetics

In writing this collection of poems, it became immediately imperative that I develop a system of poetics, a set of artistic morals to guide the work and ground my intentions. This comes not only from the writing process itself, but in no small part from my readings as well. I began taking a closer look at the poets that have most affected me and asking myself what they have done artistically to achieve such an effect. While I would not say that I attempt to emulate any of the following poetic styles, I try to guide my pen by the most basic values that stand out in their works. In following their collective lead, I have developed a style that uniquely communicates the events and feelings at the heart of my own work, emphasizing all that I value most as a reader.

In Ocean Vuong's poems, it's a matter of vulnerability. When I read his first book, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, I was struck most by the honesty of his poetics. It could be argued that honesty is the essence of all poetry, and that all poets are simply trying to convey some message in its truest form. What made the difference in Vuong's work is the gentle bravery with which he invites readers into the most intimate of scenes. In "Trojan," he describes a young man dancing in a red dress, the way the dress is "petaling off him like the skin / of an apple" as he sways, "As if dancing could stop the heart / of his murderer from beating" (Vuong 9). Describing the secret and forbidden love between two young men, the poem "Homewrecker" ends on a kiss: "a knife on the tongue turning / into a tongue" (Vuong 32). The poem "Notebook Fragments," five pages of

assembled shards of consciousness, practically begins with the lines “Discovery: My longest pubic hair is 1.2 inches. / Good or bad?” (Vuong 68). There is no hint of embarrassment or shame in the poems, only honesty.

In my collection, this vulnerability has manifested in a number of images of a man weeping. It sometimes is related to family separation as a persistent element of migrant family life, and other times is related to the untimely death of a father figure. My intent is to build this repeated image in contrast to the traditional ideals of manhood as portrayed in the United States South and Mexican machismo alike. In my poem “Letting Go,” I envision the concept of closure as a trip to the hardware store,

standing between the $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
ceiling panels and making a decision
for the first time without crying
into your hands.

Opposite this idea of closure is the young man in my poem “Daily Bread,” who loses his father to deportation and never gets the closure he needs. The speaker encounters him in a bakery, where the young man explains his tears: “It’s just that I lost my father when I was very young... the government gave him a free ride back to Guatemala and I never saw him again.” Here, the tragedy of family separation is emphasized through the public tears of this young man, pushed to extremely vulnerable dialogue with a stranger as a result of his childhood trauma. Both poems want to normalize expressive grief within cultures that value stoic male figures.

In Solmaz Sharif’s and Javier Zamora’s poems, it’s emotional politics. They each write on topics of extreme political importance, but approach it from a place of emotional poetics. Sharif wants readers to be angry about United States militarism in the Middle East, and so she invites them to be sad about the fragile lives that are carelessly taken there. The title poem of her book, *Look*, casually notes that

it could take as long as 16 seconds between
 the trigger pulled in Las Vegas and the Hellfire missile
 landing in Mazar-e-Sharif, after which they will ask
Did we hit a child? No. A dog. (Sharif 3)

Her poem “Reaching Guantánamo,” written as a series of censored letters, begins:

Dear Salim,

Love, are you well? Do they you?
 I worry so much. Lately, my hair , even
 my skin . The doctor’s tell me its . (Sharif 45)

Readers feel the lovers’ pain and understand the political undertones. The emotion behind the written words fuel the social message behind the collection.

Javier Zamora’s book, *Unaccompanied*, explores his experience as a child journeying from El Salvador to the United States alone. As in Sharif’s work, Zamora’s poems focus on the emotional story, in order to get readers to understand the complexities of the modern border crisis and the immigrant’s place in the United States. His book’s opening poem, “To Abuelita Neli,” laments the physical and temporal distance between the speaker and his grandmother: “This is my 14th time pressing roses in fake passports / for each year I haven’t climbed marañón trees. I’m sorry / I’ve lied about where I was born” (Zamora 3). In the poem “June 10, 1999,” the speaker begs his mother to let go of the guilt she feels over what befell him on his dangerous journey across the border, saying, “you couldn’t have known this could happen / Mom / you couldn’t have / no es su culpa / no lo es” (Zamora 79). Zamora focuses intently on the familial impact of the international circumstances that force children to make their way unaccompanied from El Salvador to the United States.

Emotional politics is at the very heart of my intentions for my own collection. The popular narratives regarding migrants in our nation, particularly in the historically racist U.S. South, do

great harm to migrant communities by erasing their humanity. A great part of this problem is that the political discussion is driven by data, turning individuals into numbers. In nearly all of my poems, my work is to turn these numbers back into people. For example, how does family life go on in the wake of a deportation?

**Scenes of torture:
a fiesta.**

Young boy's birthday, we're
singing. When he asks, we will
tell him again—he's on vacation,
your papá, he's on vacation in México,
I don't know when, I don't know when...

And the white cake shines
beneath the candles' light.
And the young boy's smile
shines.

The answer is that it simply goes on. The father's absence in this poem is painfully present, yet the remaining family does what they can to carry on as usual. They buy the birthday cake, they sing the birthday song, they hold their tongue and their tears until the party is over and the boy is fast asleep. It is this type of tension—the hyper-personal fallout of family separation policies—that I want to protest. As with Sharif and Zamora, I believe that one of the best ways to do so is with an emotional snapshot. The form of the poem above, what I am calling a *pajarito* or “little bird,” is my approach to cataloging these snapshots. They are composed of two-line titles, a five-line stanza, and a four-line stanza, all written in Spanish and then translated to English. My goal is for each to address a specific emotional aspect of the highly politicized transnational experience, building through the series of poems a broad emotional understanding of what migrant communities face in the United States.

In William Carlos Williams' poems, what affects me is the simplicity. A doctor as well as a poet, Williams did not lead an impoverished life, yet much of his written works were about the poor. Although he flirts with romanticizing their plight—a trend that strikes the socially conscious part of my brain as mildly problematic—he always ensured that his poetry was widely accessible. The simplicity ensures that none of his readers would feel excluded by the usual sense of poetic elitism, and ensures especially that the very subjects of his poems, despite poverty and typically lower levels of education, would be able to read and understand them. One of his most well-known poems, “To a Poor Old Woman,” ends with the poor woman

Comforted
 a solace of ripe plums
 seeming to fill the air
 They taste good to her. (Williams 97)

There are layers upon layers of poetic significance to these lines, but without delving into any sort of educated literary analysis, readers can understand the simple narrative of a poor old woman taking comfort in her sweet plums. The poem is capable of being read by the same type of person about whom it is written. This poetic accessibility, in my opinion, will prove critical to the survival of poetry as a popular art form, as people become increasingly disinterested by elitist writing styles.

I would like to think that each of my poems is written in a way that makes it accessible to the majority of potential readers. A lot of my practice in poetry is writing poems on the spot at the Chattanooga Market for tips. These poems are, by necessity, accessible. Sometimes they are written for children, often they are for individuals with no other interest in poetry or literature, but simply want the performative experience. For example, a birthday ode for a woman with bright eyes and curly hair, commissioned by her boyfriend:

There in the Garden

grew a pair of

forget-me-nots. Beneath
the willow branches,
like striking eyes under
curled and leafy bangs,
and I could never look away.
Like far-away eyes under
twisted golden bangs,
I could never look away.

The Context of the Collection

My parents, natives of New Jersey, moved to the South just a few years before I was born. In Soddy Daisy, Tennessee they were given a hearty Dixie welcome, which included such events as an attempt to set their Yankee dog on fire with matches and gasoline tossed over the fence. While my bloodline follows my genetic ancestors back to the North, I was born and raised in the Tennessee Valley. I have inherited the history of the South, by virtue of walking in the mountains and swimming in the rivers. My cultural ancestors owned slaves and chased the Cherokee from their lands. They built the churches that still stand on the hills at every turn of my childhood. They sired families that carry their 18th century values into today's schools and legislature. I grew up believing in the beauty of the South and the importance of my heritage. I grew up surrounded by the fear of the other. The United States was always number one, matched in greatness, perhaps, by only the Confederate States. The South indoctrinates its children with these things.

Somewhere in the midst of this Southern cultural experience, I fell in love with an undocumented immigrant from México. I had never been so close to someone who did not belong in some way to the dominant narrative of the South. She challenged everything I knew about myself and the identities I had inherited from both my parents and my Southern upbringing. I came to understand the injustices I had never been forced to face, the realities that lay hidden beneath the mainstream "American" narrative. When we married, I took those burdens as my own,

becoming a part of a transnational family. To better engage with my new family, I learned Spanish and then spent almost four months living in México during the Fall of 2018. While there, I studied migration theory and the history of U.S.-México relations, and began to see the transnational family as a historic pillar of United States culture.

Towards the end of my stay in México, my cohort drove several days on winding roads through Chiapas to reach an indigenous community's mountain church, and the terrain we crossed reminded me much of home. The mountains, of course, alike to our Appalachia. The river, too, so similar to the Tennessee. Each land is ravaged by mining and deforestation, the poor paid to destroy their own home. Each culture is built around religion, relying on both the good and the evil that comes with. Each population is cultivated by the pride, the shame, the unique—yet shared—experience of the National South. All of this I saw on that long drive, in the various pueblos we visited, and all of it reflected what I know of my own upbringing in Tennessee.

Having arrived at last at this particular church, we stood just inside the door. I watched a group of tourists who were in turn watching the indigenous women at worship—the religion of the West (objectification) once more encroaching aggressively on the religion of the mountain pueblo (a blend of traditional faith and Catholicism). A woman on her knees broke a chicken's neck, crossed her coughing child with its beak. The tourists moved in closer. I hated what I saw, but understood, also, that I was a part of it. In the duality of the tourists and the indigenous women, it was all too clear to which group I belonged.

My experience thus far had held a mirror up to my own South, and looking into this mirror then, lit by the thousand candles on the church floor, unsettled me. In Chiapas, I was the tourist, stationed opposite those indigenous women. To carry this duality through the mirror, across the border to Tennessee, I had to ask myself, *who represents the other half?* Who are the “objectified

indigenous women” in my community that I, as a member of the “tourist” group, am watching? The troubling conclusion I reached in a matter of moments: my wife, an undocumented Mexican immigrant. My wife, and perhaps by extension her family, even the whole of our immigrant community. While I well understand that similar trees and bodies of water do not mean that everything translates perfectly from one South to another, this seeming duality represents the definitive heart of my own questions regarding my place in a transnational community. What does it mean for me, the theoretical Tennessee equivalent of those tourists, to have fallen in love with the theoretical Tennessee equivalent of what I found inside the church? Where and what is the border between my own long childhood and the life I share today with my wife, objectified equally for her elegance as for her supposed illegality? How does the South which produced me dialogue with that other South which produced her, and what claim do I really have to either? What does it mean in the age of migration to be from a place, of a place, or between places?

Between afternoon rains, I sat in the garden courtyard at my house in Oaxaca and wrote a chapbook. I wanted to find the answers to all of these questions. I wanted to record the pain I found in migrant shelters, the gross injustice of U.S. immigration court. I wanted to find the roots of my own national pride, Mexican national pride, and transnational pride. I tried to explain what it is like to see my wife denied everything that I am given freely, what it is like to throw a birthday party for a child whose father has just been deported. In writing those poems, I opened myself up and began to pick through the layers of identity I had accrued. I hoped that my experience, shared through my work, would begin to erase some of the physical and cultural borders that divide us—humans—from one another. It was a good place to start. Before I was fully ready, I bid goodbye to the two turtles who watched me write in that courtyard and made my way back home to Tennessee.

The chapbook I wrote encapsulated certain powerful moments from my time in México, pairing them with experiences of Tennessee, yet so much was left to be said. I began the process of turning the small collection I had into a thesis-level work, asking more questions and creating goals for the expanded collection. I prepared to delve deeper into the United States South, with love and with shame, and I prepared to face the most heartbreaking facets of the transnational experience. For several weeks in the spring of 2019, my new garden courtyard was a small apartment in Nashville, where my father was temporarily living during his cancer treatment. When we weren't driving to appointments or planning his new life, my father would sleep and I would write. Although time was abundant, the stress and emotion of the situation stunted the poems I was writing. Focus was rare. I kept working, if only for the distraction.

When my father beat all three cancers—only a year into his treatment—I put aside my project to help him settle into his new future. He could no longer work in construction, as he had for some twenty-seven years, so he planned to go to school for motorcycle maintenance and join me at the Indian Motorcycle dealership. My mother, despite their divorce, purchased a travel trailer for him to stay in during recovery and his year of school. I had bought my first house, and as I worked on the renovations he would sit on my porch with his Gatorade and his sun hat and advise me through each stage. We began to catch up on our lives, on the things we had missed during the cancer. Only a few months after successfully finishing treatment, a common fungus took hold of his lungs. His immune system remained compromised from the chemotherapy, and within three weeks he died.

I can do nothing to keep him from my poems. Whether I am writing on my porch for my thesis, or at the Sunday market for paying customers, my father appears in the lines. I do not resist. Alongside working on my house, writing for him is helping me to cope. In terms of my thesis

work, I am exploring family separation in ways that I had not previously encountered. I have always known deportation to be a sort of death within the migrant family, but never have I been able to draw such a powerful connection to my own life. In the duality of my thesis—Tennessee and Oaxaca, my family by blood and my family by marriage—illness and immigration policy act on the family with similar cruelty. Although my father was of the north, he always embodied the south in my eyes: his affinity for country music, his work with his hands, his pickup truck and motorcycles, his love for evenings on the lake. Through these living aspects of his memory, I am able to further ground my poems in the southern valley where he raised me. I have no other choice.

The Translations

Just as I have encountered my father in contemplating and writing on the South, I am encountering my wife and her family through reading and writing poetry in Spanish. As I became more proficient in the Spanish language, translating simple poetry became a favorite method for learning new vocabulary. This introduced me to writings from all over Latin America, many reflecting the traits I saw first in my wife's family and later in Oaxaca. Poets like Octavio Paz, Rosario Castellanos, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz were my literary introduction to México. Though not always writing specifically about their country, these poets embed México into their works in the same practically unavoidable manner that I embed Tennessee into mine. It's in the imagery they construct, the language they use (Spanish, of course, but so uniquely Mexican), and the stories they share. Reading their works as originally written, as opposed to in translation, gave me a deeper understanding of the artistic labor involved in translation. Beginning to translate them myself gave me a deeper respect for the poets that undertake such an endeavor.

The complexities of translation run so much deeper than conflicting syntax rules and rearranging word order. I've come to see that direct translation in poetry—the idea of staying true

to the exact words that the original poet used—is fairly useless. Poetry translations ought to remain true to the emotion and the message of the poem, which often means deviating from the specific words of the original piece in order to give it power in the target language. In free verse applications, this is fairly simple to achieve. The general structure of the poem can be maintained, even including slight adjustments to line or stanza length. The goal is to generate a reaction in target language readers that aligns with the reaction a reader of the original piece is likely to experience, and the translator must do what is necessary to achieve this. For example, one of my earlier translations was of the poem “Visitas” by Octavio Paz:

Visitas

A través de la noche urbana de piedra y sequía
entra el campo a mi cuarto.
Alarga brazos verdes con pulseras de pájaros,
con pulseras de hojas.
Lleva un río de la mano.
El cielo del campo también entra,
con su cesta de joyas acabadas de cortar.
Y el mar se sienta junto a mí,
extendiendo su cola blanquísima en el suelo.
Del silencio brota un árbol de música.
Del árbol cuelgan todas las palabras hermosas
que brillan, maduran, caen.
En mi frente, cueva que habita un relámpago...
Pero todo se ha poblado de alas.

Translated to English very literally, this poem may read:

Visits

Through the urban night of rock and dryness
enters the countryside into my room.
Green arms extend with bracelets of birds,
with bracelets of leaves.
A river arrives from the hand.
The sky of the countryside also enters,
with her basket of jewels just cut.
And the sea sits together with me,
extending its very white tail on the ground.

From the silence grows a tree of music.
 From the tree hang all of the beautiful words
 that shine, mature, fall.
 On my forehead, cave inhabited by lightning...
 But all has been populated by wings.

However, edited for a better rhythm and flow, and to maintain the overall feel of the original piece in Spanish, it becomes:

You Visit

Through the dry stone urban night
 the country enters my bedroom.
 Her green arms extend with bangles of birds,
 leafy bracelets.
 She carries a river in her palm.
 The country sky enters too,
 with her basket of jewels freshly cut.
 And the sea sits herself beside me,
 extending her tail, so white, to the floor.
 A tree of music grows in the silence.
 From the tree hangs every beautiful word,
 which glisten, mature, and fall silent.
 At my brow, a cave full of lightning...
 But all has drifted in on wings. (Paz)

Each version touts totally different line lengths and word order, and even some of the images are slightly altered. The number of lines remains the same, and I was also able to keep most of the images to their original place within the poem. Looking at both versions of the translation, it ought to be relatively clear that the artistic choices made in the second version, although deviating from a more exact translation, make for a better poem in English.

In translating form poems, however, the specificity of the structure becomes an integral part of the poem. An important aspect of the original poet's labor was to fit their message into the syllable count, rhythm, and rhyme scheme of their form. A translator can maintain the message without the form, but this gives target-language readers an incomplete picture of the original poem. While I have been practicing the translation of form poems, I do not yet have a finished translation

in which I feel artistically confident. Instead, to demonstrate the complexities of this type of work, I turn to Margaret Sayers Peden's essay "Building a Translation, the Reconstruction Business: Poem 145 of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz." The original poem, in Spanish, is composed as follows:

Este que ves, engaño colorido,
 que del arte ostentando los primores,
 con falsos silogismos de colores
 es cauteloso engaño del sentido
 éste, en quien la lisonja ha pretendido
 excusar de los años los horrores,
 y venciendo del tiempo los rigores
 triunfar de la vejez y del olvido,
 es un vano artificio del cuidado,
 es una flor al viento delicada,
 es un resguardo inútil para el hado:
 es una necia diligencia errada,
 es un afán caduco y, bien mirado,
 es cadáver, es polvo, es sombra, es nada. (qtd. in Peden 15)

Peden breaks the poem down into its most important structural pieces: moments of syntax, repetition, important information, and significant images. Peden, in choosing these most critical elements, "removes the ornamental" (16). The new goal of the translation is to stick as close to the literal meaning and location of these specific parts, while everything else may be bent to maintain the rhythm, line length, and rhyme scheme of the form. What follows are two examples that Peden gives of this method, with the core elements in bold for clarity. Peden's own translation reads:

This that you gaze on, colorful deceit,
 That so immodestly displays art's favors,
 With its fallacious arguments of colors
Is to the senses cunning **counterfeit**
This on which kindness practiced to delete
 From cruel years accumulated horrors,
 Constraining time to mitigate its rigors,
 And thus oblivion and age defeat,
Is but artifice a sop to vanity,
Is but a flower by the breezes bowed,
Is but a ploy to counter destiny,
Is but a foolish labor ill-employed,
Is but a fancy, and, as all may see,

Is but cadaver, ashes, shadow, void. (Peden 22)

Another version, translated by Roderick Gill, reads:

This that you see, the false presentment planned
 With finest art and all the colored shows
 And reasonings of shade, doth but disclose
The poor deceits by earthly senses fanned!
 [Here] where in constant flattery expand
 Excuses for the stains that old age knows,
 Pretexts against the years' advancing snows,
 The foot prints of old seasons to withstand;
 'Tis but vain artifice of scheming minds;
 'Tis but a flower fading on the winds;
 'Tis but a useless protest against Fate;
 'Tis but stupidity without a thought,
 A lifeless shadow, if we meditate;
 'Tis death, 'tis dust, 'tis shadow, yea, 'tis nought. (qtd. in Peden 20)

The similarities between the bolded sections of each translation show how both poets are able to maintain the most important aspects of Sor Juana's sonnet, while taking more artistic license with the lines between in order to fit the sonnet form in English. In this way, the translations convey both the message of the original, and the labor Sor Juana underwent in order to write it.

The translations I selected to accompany my collection were all written by iconic Mexican poets. The content of their works has deepened my understanding of the culture my wife comes from, that features so prominently in my own work. They display the simplicity that I so admire, while holding onto the layers of meaning and imagery that have landed them among the most well-known of Spanish-language poets. Translating them has given me practice in the poetics of both languages, and equipped me with vocabularies that contribute to the repetitive image-building of my whole collection.

The Collection Moving Forward

I originally set out to write a collection of poems to share what I learned during my time in México: about myself, my family, our international community, and all the baggage that comes

with. I had a number of ideas and lines, what I imagined to be the roots of the poems that would fill out this body of work. There would be poems on cemeteries and graves, from the Confederate cemeteries of my childhood, to the buried abuelos in México that my friends never met, to the places where the desert sand blows over bones at the border. There would be poems of celebration—of birthdays, of citizenship, of graduations, of survival—poems of love, of hate, of reunion and of separation. Some of these ideological seeds grew into full poems. Some of them remain seeds. As I wrote each week, new ideas became new poems, and the scope of the collection expanded. As I mourned my father's death, the scope of the collection expanded. As I translated more Spanish-language poems into English, the scope of the collection expanded.

My original goal was to write approximately thirty-five poems, but I ended up with over sixty and some twenty more translations. Although this far surpassed my original intentions, I have yet to complete this collection. Many of those original ideas, which I still feel are integral to the work as a whole, have yet to come to fruition. Many more ideas, which I jotted down along the way, are still awaiting their final form. What began as a collection to be published in its entirety as my Honors Thesis has now become something else. The future of this work is still unknown. I will continue to work at it--I practically have no choice. My obsession is to get to the heart of the pain and joy of cross-cultural, transnational families and communities, and poetry is my most useful tool in this endeavor. Perhaps one day I will publish the collection as a whole. Perhaps I will break it down into chapbooks, based on form or content. Perhaps these poems are destined for magazine or journal submissions. Perhaps this is a work that will never come to a satisfactory end. Whatever the path, I recognize now that my ambitions at the outset of this project were both too big and too small. I have a lot more work to do.

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