

Silence for the One about to Sing:

Selected Short Lyrics from Two Collections

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ABSTRACT

Silence for the One about to Sing contains a chapbook of 30 poems (selected from two collections) and a prologue. In the prologue, I discuss my influences and inspirations, and explain the creative and critical devices I use throughout my art. Inspired by the Portuguese music genre of fado and its latest iteration, the novo fado, selections in each collection feature code-switching, recurring motifs (birds, oil, and water), and sensory language. A variety of speakers and travelogues is also used to explore themes of agency, identity, loss, and restoration. These devices coalesce to produce a progressive framework for the classic elements of fado (i.e., melancholia, location, and longing) and the innovative expression of novo fado, a dynamic which comprises the poetic arc of each piece in my collections. Much of the writing represents a mixture of allegorical, narrative, and surrealist poetry styles.

DEDICATION

For an Angel and a Phoenix.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

“Para os portugueses o fado é a nossa alma nacional. Mas o fado é universal e a língua não é uma fronteira. Não é preciso perceberem o que digo. Porque o fado tem o poder de atravessar essa fronteira e de nos fazer sentir emoções.”

“Fado to the portuguese people is like our nacional soul. But fado is universal and the language is not a frontier. You don’t have to understand what I am saying. Because fados have the power of crossing that frontier and making you feel emotions.”

—Mariza

“Sorrow is not a stranger to any of us, though only a few have learned that it is not our enemy either.”

—Staci Etheredge

The title of my thesis (and chapbook), *Silence for the One about to Sing*, is derived from the imperative often given in the fado houses of Portugal to ensure the obligatory silence due a fadista at the start of a performance (Elliott 183). Arguably Portugal's national song, Fado is a music genre characterized by melancholia, longing, and references to the sea. It has a rich cultural heritage steeped in the tradition of storytelling (Khalvati 14). The word fado actually means "fate" in Portuguese. My investigations into these associative links and traditions of fado lore have led me to discover that the fadistas of today are reconsidering its stylistic framework. Reclaiming fado as their own, they break silence with a new voice, creating a new form—the novo fado—by which they hope to capture the tone of a more positive and progressive Portugal while preserving the time-honored traditions of fado. By incorporating more enhanced stagecraft, quality sound engineering, and diverse artist collaboration, novos fadistas create hyperreal utopias for the expression of fado. This dynamic interplay of fado and novo fado best describes the poetic arc of my chapbook.

Silence for the One about to Sing is comprised of two collections of narrative poetry: *Grown Folks Need Their Own Space* and *13 Days in Chitré*. While *Grown Folks*—selections of earlier work—emulates the traditional tone of fado, *13 Days in Chitré* emulates the progressive aesthetics of novo fado. Informed by the style conventions of contemporary artists like Björk, Marina Abramović, and Wes Anderson, much of the writing in *13 Days* includes allegory, meta-textual references, and hyper reality. Occasionally, both collections feature code-switching and recurring motifs (birds for hope, oil for adversity, and water for renewal); however, in *13 Days in Chitré*, all devices coalesce to create new stories and new worlds that allow each poem's narrator, speaker, and voice to explore themes of agency, identity, loss, and restoration. Inspired by the art of old fadistas and that of the new fadistas, my goal for this thesis is to create a

collection of poetry that (1) reclaims the narrative paradigm of the distinctly sad, fatalistic poem and (2) serves as a model of didactic, transformative language art.

The Art of Fado: Form

Replicating a world of fado requires a knowledge of classic fado form. According to *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, form can refer to the minutiae of the text at one level, to the shape of the text in itself, or to the characteristics a text may share with others (420). Richard Elliott, author of *Fado and the Place of Longing*, notes the minutiae of fado consists of “elements ... [present in] fado stories—those expressed via acts of speech and song and via the written word (novel, play, lyric, history)—that, through constant repetition, come to represent in however varied or mutated a fashion, a large part of the ‘fado-ness’ of fado... “ (14). The cheap café, Lisboan districts, symbolic characters of class, alleyways, shadows, light and dark, safety and danger, public and private, life and death along with saudade, loss, memory, mourning, and witnessing comprises an all but exhaustive list of elements that may appear in any given fado form. Yet, while these traditional tropes readily distinguish fado from any other music genre, many iterations of fado have emerged.

In her ethnology, *Fado Resounding: Affective Politics and Urban Life*, Lila Ellen Gray asserts that “fado as genre foregrounds story and feeling, the telling of stories rendered affective through musical performance and poetic form ... Fado is not a fixed, rigid form. It is about individual style, which is always changing” (69). Lisbon fado, for instance, is generally divided into two styles: “*fado castiço* (‘*fado tradicional*’) and *fado canção* (‘song fado’).” *Fado Castiço*

texts employ “common poetic structures, such as the quatrain or five-, six- and ten- verse stanzas.” The accompaniment pattern, the I-V harmonic scheme and the regular 4/4 metre are the identifying elements of these fados and are basically fixed. All other elements are variable ... Fado canção was a development of the late nineteenth century and evolved through theatrical revistas (shows). It is distinguished by a stanza-and-refrain song style and uses more complex harmonic structures. It is this style that came to be associated with the reknown fadista Amália Rodrigues and others influenced by her, although both Amália and the ‘new fadistas’ continued to perform the more traditional styles” (Elliott 26-27).

“Lagrima,” which appears on Amália Rodrigues’s 1983 album of the same name, is a quintessential fado canção (Elliott 59). Here, an exerpt demonstrates the use of tropes and saudade:

Cheia de penas
Cheia de penas me deito
E com mais penas
No meu peito
Já me ficou no meu peito
Este jeito
O jeito de te querer tanto

[Full of suffering
Full of suffering, I sleep
And with more suffering I awake
In my breast
Already lodged in my breast
Is this habit
The habit of wanting you so

Desespero
Tenho por meu desespero
Dentro de mim
Dentro de mim un castigo
Não te quero
Eu digo que te não quero
E de noite
De noite sonho contigo

Despair
I have my despair
Inside me
A punishment inside me
I don't want you
I say that I don't want you
And at night
At night I dream about you

Se considero
Que um dia hei-de morrer
No desespero
Que tenho de te não ver
Estendo o meu xaile
Estendo o meu xaile no chão
Estendo o meu xaile
E deixo-me adormecer

If I consider
That one day I will die
In the desperation
That I have at not seeing you
I lay out my shawl
I lay out my shawl on the floor
I lay out my shawl
And let myself fall asleep

Se eu soubesse
Se eu soubesse que morrendo
Tu me havias
Tu me havias de chorar
Uma lágrima
Por uma lágrima tua
Que alegria
Me deixaria matar

If I thought
If I thought that when I died
You would have to
You would have to cry
One tear
For one of your tears
How happy
I would be to die]

The Universality of Saudade

The static agent of fado dynamism is saudade, the Portuguese word for untranslatable yearning: the quidditas of fado. It appears in many other Portuguese-inspired music genres as evidence of a once far reaching colonial empire and diaspora (Khalvati 17-20; Nery 11-16).

Aside from the generative aspect of seafaring, I'm interested in the intersection of saudade and storytelling. How does a voice of saudade become altered and empowered? When does the confessional become revelational, transformational for self and other? Is it upon utterance, repetition, reclamation, or revision? Departing from the ethnographic implications of fado for an entire people, I want to focus on the effect fado and fado-making has on the fadista.

Guy Allen's essay, "Language, Power, and Consciousness: A Writing Experiment at the University of Toronto," affirms the psychotherapeutic role of storytelling and sharing of personal experience that is evident in fado (65). The essay argues that "work with language leads inevitably to the work with the self and its life among other selves" (95). The "talking cure," Freud's psychoanalytic system for actualizing a "safe place" for the designing of narratives from scattered, often incoherent pieces to make new meaning, precedes the "writing cure" and provides some insight into what makes a thriving personal narrative (Allen 92).

Jeremy Holmes, British National Health Service psychotherapist, describes successful psychotherapy in similar terms: "The patient makes a story, 'a model of the world as it was, transmuted into a form which can be stored, used, and when necessary, updated.' The desired outcome is 'autobiographical competence'— 'to become a person is to know one's own story.' There is a connection between the ability to build a coherent story, 'and the sense of self-esteem and effectiveness which underlie a strong sense of identity...'" (qtd. in Allen 92). Furthermore, "theorists point to the 'therapeutic frame,' a place where ordinary rules of 'logic, common sense and taste' are temporarily suspended so that the analysand may go through 'disorganization and reorganization'" (Skura 376).

In *Writing Plural Worlds in Contemporary U.S. Poetry*, Jim Keller writes, "Plural-world forms of poetic innovation with different moods—alternative ways to render the space between

self and world—provide a philosophical antiessentialism that reduces neither to deconstructive, diacritical relations nor to identity-political positivities. The point of plural-world poesis is to offer an “n + 1 ontology,” where the act of adding worldviews and new modes of cognitive alignments limits hegemonic discourse and gives a richer sense of embodied worldhood to communal experience (20).

Babette Deutsch’s *Poetry Handbook: A Dictionary of Terms* defines form as “the metrical and stanzaic organization of a poem [that] may, be conventional [or] established by long use, such as the pattern of a ballad, a sonnet, or any of the FRENCH FORMS ... [or it may be] as loose and novel as polyphonic prose.” It is “that which gives definite shape, emotional power, and beauty to the materials of man’s experience out of which the writer has composed his work ... a ‘synthesizing principle’” (56). When the fadista shares a fado, the fadista’s sense of self and other selves becomes more pronounced. “The syncretic, reiterative form of traditional fado (which, to some extent, fado canção shares) allows for hearings and musical experiences that become saturated by past renderings yet that are always newly inflected through individual improvisation” (Gray 17). Meaning becomes enhanced and expanded, less solipsistic—more the result of mapping through layers of preexistent language to create a newly coded identity.

Certainly, Portugal’s modernist poet, Fernando Pessoa, managed this Lacanian concept throughout his literary career. His works often centered on two main concepts: identity and reality. He created multiple alter egos (which he called heteronyms) in order to deconstruct various aspects of his personality. Interestingly enough, the word “pessoa” means both “person” and “nobody” in Portuguese. While literary critics have remarked on the fragmentation of self and marked use of mask symbolism within his works, Pessoa’s commitment to such an intense

regimen of myth-making not only acknowledges an already multiplicitous nature of self, but also recognizes a constant need to regenerate and reinvent self (F. Pessoa, and Richard Zenith xiii).

According to Elliott, some of Pessoa's works have been posthumously rendered as fados. In addition to his devices of reinvention, Pessoa often incorporated tropes of fado into his works. His "Ah Quanta Melancolia" published in 1924 appears on Camané's 1998 album *Na Linha da Vida* employing the following verses:

Ah quanta melancholia!
Quanta, quanta solidão!
Aquela alma, que vazia
Que sinto inútil e fria
Dentro do meu coração!

[Oh what melancholy!
So much so much solitude!
That soul, that emptiness,
That I feel useless and cold
Within my heart!]

This first stanza of "Ah Quanta Melancolia" captures the existential quality that is present in most fados. In this case, the sense of loss that is being conveyed stems from the absence of something yet to be realized. We could call this something a full expression or realization of "being." Pessoa's "The Poet Fancying Each Belief" provides insight into his process of delving into the imaginary in order to discover that truth of being (F. Pessoa):

The poet fancying each belief
So wholly through and through
Ends by imagining the grief
He really feels is true.

And those who read what he has spelt
In the read grief feel good—
Not in the two griefs he has felt,
But one they never could.

Thus to beguile and entertain
The reason, does he start,
Upon its rails, the clockwork train
That's also called the heart.

In the anthologized essay, “Storylines on the New Racism: Student Narratives, Teacher Narratives, and Public Narratives,” Victor Villanueva discusses the correlation between tropes and truth. He submits that “[we] process knowledge by way of tropes, although nonexperts kind of fold all tropes into one: metaphor” (115). He credits Kenneth Burke’s 1941 foundational essay, “Four Master Tropes” with positing that “rhetoric is epistemological” and that four tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) “have the power to lead us to some understanding of ‘truth’” (115). He further argues, “[we] are affected, often not consciously, by the language we receive and use, by trope. That means we are ideologically affected ... [Our] assumptions about how the world works are influenced—might even be created by—the language we receive and use. Large things. Worldviews ... [If] that’s the case, then we’re also affected by the language we *don’t* use” (115). As Villanueva suggests, by placing additional emphasis on the tropes and language already in play, *novos fadistas* use silence and inflection to bring focus to what is not said.

“O Silêncio da Guitarra,” a traditional fado appearing first on premier *novo fadista* Mariza’s junior album, *Fado Curvo* (2003), features her vocal “[asserting] its dominion over [a sacred] silence.” Described as an album that experiments with musical style by adding trumpet and piano while incorporating song structures that differ hugely from other fados, *Fado Curvo* features silences at center stage (Elliott 151). In another track entitled “Loucura,” featured on an earlier album, *Fado em Mim* (2001), Mariza proclaims: “I am of the fado / How do I know / I live a poem sung / From a fado that I invented.” It’s as if she is saying, “I represent fado, I am fado, and this is how fado sounds now” (Elliott 150).

Melancholic Melismas: Coding for Hyper Reality

In his anthology, *Singing School*, Robert Pinsky affirms: “Models provide inspiration, which is different from imitation. The visual artist looks at the world, but also at art. Similarly, the musician listens... [and] the filmmaker watches great movies, in order to gain mastery from examples (xi). My main influences for this work (Björk, Marina Abramović, and Wes Anderson) are artists who specialize in those aforementioned categories and can be considered *novos fadistas* in their own right. Björk specializes in creating aural worlds of utopian punk in her music. Marina Abramović structures her performances “as compositional tableaux, in which the body is placed in a pattern rendered imagistic by repetitive, often symmetrical action, or by absolute stillness” (Abramovic 13-16). Wes Anderson, is “[an] example of a modern director who has a significant input in a number of areas of production resulting in a distinctive style, which links his films together and separates them from the work of others...” (Browning x-xii). Exhibiting *novo fadista*-like execution of style and technique throughout their works, they are poets of non-poetic forms.

In their article, “Utopian Punk: The Concept of the Utopian in the Creative Practice of Björk,” John Lynch and Peter Webb argue that “Björk mobilizes two quite distinct understandings of the utopian at different points in her career: from utopia as tied to a location or place to something defined as a process of actualization in a transitory moment of unification.” Her music employs a recurrent theme: “hybridization of the musical elements, a cross-pollination of sources of national musics and international popular music to create a hybrid that does not fit generic convention and works in contrast to themes that often refer to Icelandic culture.” By incorporating “notions of the utopian that ... are imbued within processes of cultural hybridity

and evolved through a globalized travelogue [she creates] a transitory moment of unification in different locations and situations” (313-20).

“What is at work within this formulation is an awareness of the need for imagining things as potentially different as key to the emergence of a radical dialogue with the future” (Webb and Lynch 326). Björk’s creative practice is rooted in the crux, the intersectionality of oppositional concepts—local/global, space/time, purity/hybridity. These concepts fuel a progressive, yet intermittent sense of coherence within each project (Webb and Lynch 324). Formulations of landscape and identity serve as a pole of attraction to her national imaginary and are as easily deconstructed as any other Romantic belief. Yet, simultaneously, Björk is aware and open to the diversity of experience generated through globalization. Here, she is quoted in an interview from 2008: “I am Icelandic, yes, but I was also the one who went out there and mingled my voice with electricity. I collaborated with foreigners and travelled a lot” (Webb and Lynch 323).

So a shift away from the understanding of utopia as an idealized notion of *place* to a utopia as a *moment* ... an instant when elements from a range of processes combine to actualize a potential is evident in the Björk’s body of work and her statements of authorial intent. Such statements embody the tense paradox of grounding the utopian in a purity of place and yet, on the other, the inherently hybrid nature of contemporary music production and a globalized cultural experience (Webb and Lynch 323). The emphasis, therefore, was on music as a process, as transformative action that transported an audience to a place that made them aware of their individual power (Webb and Lynch 319).

Marina Abramović, another influence, explores power as it pertains to presence. She is “an internationally acclaimed artist, born in Yugoslavia and resident in New York, who has often taken her own body as the medium for a series of intense live artworks (many of them made in

collaboration with fellow artist Ulay) exploring the limits of the body, the ethics of spectatorship, the interplay of pain and repetition in performance” (Conroy x). Works like *The Lovers: Walk on the Great Wall* (1988) and *The Artist is Present* (2010) are quintessential examples of her art. They demonstrate use of the “concept of rhythm as pace, of years as measurable periods of one’s biography, of repeatable units, time loops, and alternative temporal and spatial experience.” By presenting everyday actions as “psychologically and visually dramatic propositions that demand an open-ended commitment from the viewer,” Abramović’s art delivers a grand framework similar to that exhibited in *no vo fadista* art (Abramović, Biesenbach and Museum of Modern Art (New York 13).

The Great Wall Walk, originally intended to be a ninety-day journey culminating in Abramović’s marriage to Ulay as they met in the middle of the Great Wall of China, actually ended in the couple’s personal and professional split (Abramović, Biesenbach and Museum of Modern Art (New York 16). The departure, with all of its cinematic drama, challenged Abramović to seek a new partner. She began to engage audiences more in her work. She recalls, “After walking the Chinese Wall, I realized that for the first time I had been doing a performance where the audience was not physically present. In order to transmit this experience to them I built a series of transitory objects with the idea that the audience could actively take part” (Abramović, Biesenbach and Museum of Modern Art (New York 16). The most recent and most popular of those newly structured performances calling for the audience as performance partner is *The Artist is Present*, performed at The Modern Museum of Art from March 14-May 13, 2010.

Characterized by New York Times op-ed writer, Arthur C. Danto, as a performance that was “very much a dialogue de sourds — a dialog of the deaf [in which communication was] on another plane,” *The Artist is Present*’s rendition of *Night Sea Crossing* incorporated members of

the artist's audience. Each participant was allowed an opportunity to sit opposite Abramović, separated by a table—a common object used in her work (Danto).

Likewise, Anderson challenges filmgoers to interact with his films. By placing Hitchcock-like cameos and other connotative elements in his films for Anderson film aficionados to spot, he builds a cache of meta-textual references. “For some, [his] concern with the minutiae of production matches the pretentiousness they associate with the self-conscious artiness of poetry...” (Browning x). “Anderson foregrounds his stylistic choices so clearly, viewers are sometimes more aware of aspects of film form and similarity with other Anderson films, far more than when watching films by other directors” (Browning x-xii). His movies are full of references to their own workings ... The sense of [his] films speaking to themselves and primarily created for his circle of friends is exacerbated by the number of in-jokes (the prison uniforms bearing “Wasco State Penitentiary” after David Wasco, the production designer), a further example of text on screen, and particularly the naming of characters. Anderson rarely chooses character names at random ... characters have had cartoonish names, signature actions, and catch phrases. Personal friends and regular extras, like Stephen Dignan or Brian Tenenbaum, may have provided inspiration (the latter blended with Salinger)” (Browning 160).

Explicating the Inexplicable: Translating the Untranslatable

In my poems, I mimic the pervasiveness of *saudade* and fuse culture while evoking community by incorporating nostalgia and longing into travelogues. I take cues from Anderson and Mariza by adding symbols (birds, oil and water), and by adhering to select settings: the

coast, the city, or the sea. In some of my poems, I use homonyms and code switching (a bit of Spanglish) to ground rhythm, enhance lyricism, and point to dramatic developments within a poem. Speakers undergo transformations. This is true of poems from my second collection (e.g., “13 Days in Chitré,” “Aptronym,” and “Hotel Kevin”). While metatextual references help to create hyper reality in those particular poems, nostalgia, and saudade are the underpinning currents in others from my first collection (e.g., “City Tree,” “Northern Cali,” and “Flight Delay”).

My poem “Quizás,” a poem of courage, survival, and transformation, is one such example. Early in the poem, the speaker receives upsetting news: “At first, I was angry with you / In tantrum, I marched afuera” (1-2). The setting, relevant to the trajectory of the poem, is initially in cold, beautiful and potentially uninhabitable Patagonia. After reflecting, the speaker reaches a point of clarity during which messages of hope are received (“Mariposas brought mensajes for my cover / in codes of all colors”) (4-5). The speaker is portrayed to be the recipient of mercy and favor in the way of advice or encouragement just before witnessing the semblance of their relationship disappear, “I sat pensively under this tent, / Watching as a warm night pelted/ an incandescent belt of ice over the Patagonia” (7-9). Rejuvenated by these messages, the speaker embarks on a kind of walkabout or long journey of transformation.

This transformation is evident in emerging scenes before it is actually evidenced in the speaker. Cold, mountainous, and remote terrain changes to a place “beyond the border” populated by a “village” (11-12). The same stanza features the speaker taking a ride on a bus or “colectivo” (12). New boundaries are discovered. New experiences are created. The tension involved in the decision making that the speaker must do is dramatized by the juxtaposition of hot and cold/dry and wet in “a warm night” and a “belt of ice” (7-8). It is echoed in later lines:

“south of arid land / Surrounded by sal y mar” (13-14). In the fifth stanza, the visual image of an echo is introduced: In the seventh stanza, the third and fourth lines provide an actual echo of the words ‘no more’ in print: “No more roses to remind me of your love; and, strangely, / No more birds to remind me of a listening pity” (16-17). Here, birds represent hope, but the speaker must face adversity at this stage of the journey alone. Water is featured five times signaling the speaker’s renewal at multiple stages until “courage” surfaces from “deep waters.” Ultimately, the tone of the poem transforms from one of loss and melancholia to resolution and victory.

Reclaiming the Narrative Paradigm: Duende and Volta

In the foreword of Colette Conroy’s *Theatre & The Body*, Abramović makes the statement that within Western cultures, “it is necessary to have some trauma, some terrible tragedy in your private life, to be able to make a mental leap; perhaps somebody dies, or you have an operation, or you clinically die and then recover. [Whereas] in Eastern cultures altered states of minds are often a matter of education and bodily practice” (ix). I found that statement ironical and yet so revelatory given the circumstances of her performance art piece, *The Great Wall Walk*. While in the midst of a dramatically traditional journey, an epically universal journey, the traumatic prompted a departure from previously regimented and rehearsed practices and inspired an innovation in her art form. This could be viewed as the volta or the eventual “turn.” It is the transformation so present in the work of all my influences. It is the transformation present in the novo fado. For fado, the volta could be considered duende or “death awareness”—not necessarily the death of a person, but the death of an idea or situation as it was previously known, the rebirth of the idea itself.

CHAPTER II

GROWN FOLKS NEED THEIR OWN SPACE

City Tree

A single tree
stands
facing

a truss of bricks
smiling red
in the summer sun.

It braces
for the metal breeze
of cars
passing by
in a painted river

An afternoon appointment
brings pruning
and an old friend.

Clips of conversation
branch
from shallow to deep

until chance
and change
interrupt with news
of less than heroic rain.

Before long, the Sun,
happy in its magnetic relationships, is...
too far in the distance.

And so, waves
only in rays.

A bark thought
reflects upon the surface of things.

Its conclusion as clear
as droplets of dew
left on sharp, short blades.

The green of one tree
is not enough shade
for a city.

Northern Cali

Around this mountain
there is another.
The color of wheat
and, at times, gold.

Where a sheen
covers the knolls
like canopy
just before sunrise.

As fog and lamplight
skip along streets
like sleepy old friends,
the city's paths and slick curves
lilt like roller coasters.

Yet a bicycle ride away
are the windmills,
and the vineyards,
is the ostrich farm
just before Alcatraz.

A chocolate shop
waits wharf side
while motorcycles
pack smallish spaces

in hues of blue, green,
yellow and red
like the reddest bridge
whose long, outstretched arms
glean sparkles of newest sunlight
racing past a finish line of steady steel,
a welcome that seems at once
too sudden and too late.

Soon the state will spell its border.
The name will change,
and I
will be on the wrong side
of everything
I love.

Flight Delay

Caked gum spots on asphalt gleam
peeling wood panel seams
panes cloaked in dust, dirt, feathers and debris,
lucky captives in the dank cool corners.

Twin spots of red spray paint
graffiti the tall post adorning a button
permanently pressed "To Walk."

A dog panting shallow breaths runs
across the street while tall, soldierly shadows
keep guard in gravel from line of yellow
to grassy green

to a parking lot across from the train station
where the days only yielding
by degrees lay just beneath a car
on the other side of a breeze.

A dried-slick circle of oil
keeps its small feathered refugee
slightly detoured from southern flight.

A momentary delay from the cool cresses
of Atlantic waters he flew so far to find.

On Market Street

As I sat, counting
the number of khakis and blue button-downs
speckling the scene of a courtyard,
a voice close by suggested a number of solutions
for a number of problems
which soon should be solved.

Caring less than not at all
about what was being said,
I drifted in and out
with the voice
and its eddies of cigarette smoke.

There, amidst intermittent silences
and quickening breezes, I nestled
on a bench, contented party to a parasol
at a silver table sitting, soaking
in passive presence of a windy day.

It seemed, in that moment, my purpose
like an olive in a martini glass.

Posthumous Prayer for Nippon

I've been thinking of Tokyo lately,
but I should have been thinking of it all along.

Not because of the cars, or ships,
or drums, or kimonos,
not because of the flashy gadgets,
the artful language, the rice,
or the mountains.

Not even the beautiful flowers
and the snow, the Pagodas,
the imperial red daring,
or colorful, animated packaging.

No, I should have been thinking
of Tokyo all along
because of Ofunato
and Sendai.

Because of Miyako
and Fukushima.

Because of the rising sun
despite the rising tide
and for Hiroshima's people.

Ars Longa, Vita Brevis

Every rain, we would avoid them.
Gray as clay, squirming,
every rain there were more.

Sliding the van's door open,
we launched into the pitch
of our front yard's torrent.

Each flash revealed another
against lightning, against thunder.
Against porch tile, inching.
Toward the portico, inching.

And so we carried on, tip-toed,
hopping, splashing in a thé dasant.
When we neared a safe, dry space,
congratulations were in order.

With silent stares, we knighted each other
for saving dear friends
from such a fate as nothingness.

The Jazz Drummer

I climb stairs
to a stage
in perfect preparedness
of 64 bars.

I sit
where I want to sit
where I've always
liked to sit

where I feel
most comfortable
most days.

Whether
in front
of a crowd
or in a silently
vacant room,

making time
has always
been easiest
this way.

With grace
in my grasp,
I'm never in need
of mercy
amid music.

Sending synapses
unto snaps
sudden,
then smooth,
then steady,

those 64 bars
succinctly,
instructively,
generously
all lead me

while
with flexed wrists
I am the one
conducting
this arrangement.

Coda

All in
I'm swinging.
Posture perfect,
my mind dances
by memory
of these movements.

I recall
a party of sound
playing meaning
and echoing metaphor.

This time, like the last,
I remember newly
and am comfortable again
with the dance.

Privation

Some of the bamboo is dying.
Yet, I have made up my mind
to dredge.

The rice paddies are waiting
to be scooped of honest grain.

I'll not panic to measure the progress,
but let the birds, the snakes, the pandas
cacaw and hiss and gnaw.

Instead, trusting only the forest's angles
to show me the dead carcass
that was once my burden.

Red Foxes

Red foxes in blue snow
trot trotting before a full moon.

Lulled by the quiet earth below
a cold ten paces too soon.

See the sounds of a wintry season.
Half a hunt is under nigh.

To cull the wily without reason
and make for man an alibi.

All is tempered, slowed, and sullen;
warm red on alabaster bears the proof.

A life is a life, no matter the price,
the purchase, or the boon.

A Guadalupe

For three months I fled
to a red room, forced pain
into a sacred stare,
pointed it
toward the Guadalupe,
and waited.

I pushed tears out,
gave my offering
of silence
with hands held
open.

I let the incense
carry my guilt
around the room,
make me ponder too long
on what I had done.

After all,
I did not come here
for forgiveness.

I came here for compassion.

Ponderance

I cannot tell you how many steps
I have taken. I can tell you
that I started with one,
and, then, I took another.

Memory does not always serve correctly,
so I must believe that I
breathed deeply, walked tall,
and somehow discovered

some corner, some curved path
leading me up, then down
up again, around and out into...

One day, I began to notice
my feeling better
about having to take any steps at all.

I forgot to notice
or count or spare
the number of steps.
I just took them.

Can I start over? The answer is Yes.
I will do this tomorrow.
I am willing to take another step.

Surely someone else
will find a way
to keep the count for me,
but I refuse
to keep track of my trail.

When I look back
I don't want to see
an oracle's number,
or footprints,
or lasting impressions.

I just want to feel
like I've been here all along,
and that I was meant to be here
in this place
in these steps.

Benign

In groups of green,
they gathered
near the newest tree
spreading warm welcome.

In patches of three
from twelve
new spores, bangled
and congruent,

they formed a clove, leaning forward
gently framing a mere mention
of what was only a moment before
unspoken.

Too Much Attention

Two birds chased me into streets
or so, I thought. Out of a garage,

I was drawn
into their flight
fractious and furtive.

They were much too bellicose
a selection of wills.

No stops, only greens, less yields.
Even my own caution fled me.

I gazed up to watch them.
See them tag and dart around the wire.
I gazed up to watch them
climb the sky even higher.

Distracted from center,
I stepped into an intersection
laughing myself into their company.

I was a jaybird without wings.
Walking. Walking. Walking.

The Blue Hole

The fear of finding
escapes a clear night.

Las estrellas son lindas
en el mundo. Ay, ay.

Listen with eyes open
as the blue ripples by

deep in the gorge below nests
built by hawks in the sky.

Porque no puede ver
the beauty without light?

The water in darkness
meets many by night.

Fly con alas
if you dare, if you try.

Never wait for the sounds
of the blue hole to sigh.

CHAPTER III
13 DAYS IN CHITRÉ

13 Days in Chitré

30 miles from city's centre,
there are babies cooing
in the jungle.

Los Santos' toddlers
are walking around
like small adults

wandering
among chickens
and dogs
and clotheslines
amarillo and azul.

They are heavy-footed
from humid heat. Knowing
exactly as the dogs know,
they say nothing.

It is too hot
to run. It
is too hot
to play.
But in the city,
it is the noonday.

Long, thin buses
are jaunting the circuit
un-doubled, un-dutched
playing reflections
across storewide windows
full of fish
and models
with prominent breasts
as plastic as the Andes
pointing forward, instead of toward
saluting a statue
whose militancy is marked
by the absence
of mangoes.

Pink is the pedestal
he quietly commands
above a flank of cars.

There is an abundance
of concrete
and coconuts.

There is always tile
in the servicio,

plenty of gas
at the Atlas Petro,

more than enough frutas
in the Mercadito,

but no water
by the third day.

Quizás

At first, I was angry with you.
In tantrum, I marched afuera.

Then, I closed my eyes.

Mariposas brought mensajes for my cover
in codes of all colors.

I sat pensively under this tent
watching as a warm night pelted
an incandescent belt of ice
over the Patagonia.

In my echo, a lake began to cry.

I followed it beyond the border, near the Altiplano
and made it by colectivo to a village
south of arid land
surrounded by sal y mar.

I met Chile. My desperation waned.
No more roses to remind me of your love; and, strangely,

no more birds to remind me of a listening pity.

Only an old petro station
where I sat, head in my hands, deciding to survive.

Sooner than later tears, too, like rivers dry.

And, courage, it is a rock in deep waters
sometimes surfacing after many stages in life—

as great and as grand
as a canyon of many colors

in the sun's light.

Inheritance

Someone once told me that the ocean was a bowl of our tears,
that every passerine was a guide, that we were lucky
we could not see the trench for the sea, the deep for the deep,
and if we did, it was because of the very picture we painted—
The Wild Danger of It All.

The lack of an echo is the lesson we should heed.
All we never hear is the balance of the story.
The naphtha that covers the wake reads like memory moving under fire.
Burned blue and bent like wires, it curls. Like waves, it furls.
Like flags, it folds. Like coffers and coffins.

Could courage be inside our boats,
for those of us with prayers for shore.
Could our minds be the masts that suffer us onward,
or are they simple sheaths
belonging to swindled swords.

Is the sea our great destination,
perhaps, to see all that the world can bare.
Could our hearts be the chains of muscle that never break beneath bones—
our persistence, the breath that rolls between, silent
like the great current that burrows beneath the seafloor.

A black sail upon which a white skull always smiles.

River Poem

The spine of the thing
it glides right past me.

To my left, I feel it sail.

I have been given over
to floating, to flailing

failing to recognize dry hopes
as miracles
in themselves.

Awake, I feel that peril
closest to the thought
which most triumphed over me.

The bird hovering this vast expanse
knows not the next meal
nor spot of land he'll see.

Yet, he
has ventured out
again and again, out and away.

Find him now
perched majestic,
confident on the smallest rock
without the slightest sway.

I would not understand it
at any other depth—
near drowning, waves collapsing
over and around my chest.

My ears, my eyes, my nose, my throat
small brooks of crest
filled with icy water.

Stiffened, I prepare to leave my mission
an ungrateful, undeserving daughter.

In that moment,
it is I who realize
the answer I never knew before.

This is why I have run to the ocean.
This is why; this is why; this is why.

If I do not die trying,
I will, quite simply, die

Life Is An Island

Life is an island Madroña
whose pages
like thin parchment
peel easily in the spring.

Readying itself
for the inscription of
moments
fleeting and beautiful,
hidden until the very end
are its aged rings.

Who will know
its story's wisdom
if we do not read it now.

Yes, come, let us write it so.
Life is a very, very,
very wise thing.

Hotel Kevin

{i}

His smile is a Jack ‘O’ Lantern’s or Cheshire cat’s. Dangling from his hand is a junky metal mold—brass loosely clipped to a wooden stake.

Celestino hands me my room key: 607. In his quietest Spanish, he instructs: *Leave the key conmigo en la mañana. When you go out, I’ll empty the trash para ti.*

La basura. I nod and walk away. A week of these exchanges and our crew begins to tease him. *Do you have a brother? Because, hermano, you are always here. Always smiling—siempre.*

Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, sábado. He looks at me as if we share a secret.

{ii}

The owner, sitting lower than the counter, emerges. Her stern eyes set above soft cheeks gesture above a flowing purple, square-neck-trimmed-in-yellow, business casual caftan. Nothing like the local polleras, but pretty. Simple.

Si, leave la llave here. She points to a place along the counter that looks like all other places along the counter and slowly turns to take a red broom from the corner of her tiny yellow office. I hear her steps, a bolero of sorts, as she sweeps the entire hotel like a song.

A stuccoed ranch. All one color. A courtyard with five palm trees. A caged façade pink-as-a-bird pink behind cream colored wrought iron.

A petro station sitting across the street and a store standing next door has everything.

A Korean family of four says *hola* to me as they each bag one of my items: gray tape to guard the window through which the gecko sneaked, a silver caldero and detergent for the wash, cloth to clean my skin of the many mezcla spills I’ve carried from the construction site.

I beg a few extra bags to go with my purchase. I will need them for the dirty clothes. Small yellow. Medium green. Large blue. They want balboas for them.

{iii}

Two red, cast iron pitcher pumps grace the square courtyard's opposite ends. I prepare my clothes in my new caldero, pump water from one pitcher pump and feel a presence close by.

Señorita, No. El agua es sucio—del cielo.

Aquí. He points to the other pump across the courtyard, picks up my caldero of clothes, and fills it with clean water.

I thank Celestino with my best Spanish, being sure to press my tongue to my teeth for the “c” and the “s.”

As his figure recedes, I barely notice the gecko sprinting across the night green, but I do notice.

In the Beginning

(for Amber & Brit)

My Love, if I begin this letter with

"My Love,"

someone will surely say,

Why, that is just like all the great love letters of all time,
but they would be wrong.

As wrong as any overcast sky

that threatens to conceal the light,

or any rain that threatens the brightest, sun-quenched day.

You see, I have copied from the Master,

and I am not so foolish to think

that there are no cloudy days

in Love's great book.

Cloudy days will come

as sure as skyscrapers face sky and sea,

and sands lapped by scalloped waves shift beneath our feet.

Patterns of wind and water

will mark the years, wrinkle away the newness.

Yet, we'll stand on beaches of all sorts.

Watch a new thing being created newer still.

No, I am not so foolish to think

that love can be contained in one letter.

The best beaches are made from more than one sand.

The best love written on more than one leaf.

And my love will not be just one letter to you, but a book of letters.

A house of words. Our names, written in a rare ink

that can never be washed away.

The Common Meal

(Chocó, Colombia - Summer of 1993)

When Mafecita puts the chalice to her lips, she tastes her first real communion. No more waiting for the smaller dipped wafers. No more dark curls hanging over the body as he holds it suspended over the blood. Now, she can taste each equally like the children who wait in the nave for their parents to return to pews. First, with them. Then, without. Then, with them again. Candles, still waiting, flames flickering, fasting before the altar.

The cassocks, the thurible, the hymns float past the altar.
Liturgy is lullaby when read during communion.
You are forgiven. Sustained. No more waiting. Sustained. Still kneeling. Sustained. While the carrier of the note is hanging like the stolen precious silver lining moment. Returned.
See, she has been waiting. See, she will finally get to taste.

Before the tasting
is over. Before the orphrey is changed from white to purple to black, and the altar stripped of its antependium. And time suspends returning only when Saturday finishes his morning patrol. Today, that includes a small communion with brothers who wait for him in a small yard with mangoes they found hanging several blocks away on a fat tree that did not belong to them. Still.

Grateful for fufu in banana leaves that time turned into cayeye with fresh mango, still grateful nine fingers remain, still grateful there is no more war for him to taste. Here, he knows this type of justice hangs in the balance of the love his father has found and sealed at an altar over 7,000 kilometers from home. Family here means a new kind of communion, and he does not want that to end. He does not want to return.

He could never return.
What he did there makes nightmares seem like still dreams. Dreams like his mother passing communion. And the church on the corner glowing red, before the taste of red could leave his tongue, before the cloth on the altar could be made into a shroud, and the small steeple left to hang

Its head tilted backward like The Great Angel, Michael, hanging on the rood awaiting the return of days when children can place flowers on the altar, lay down their guns and be still, count their fingers—all ten, and enjoy the taste of fufu with mother and father and all who want a real communion.

But today, it is cayeye with brothers in a transatlantic stillness.
Soon, Mafecita will return from a church that has not burned with the taste
of what it is like to kneel before the altar and take a real communion.

Apronym (Somewhere on Rapa Nui)

The sky, the ocean, and I
look blue today,
but we are not.

Carl Jung would say
we are synchronic.

Big statues
built long ago.

Loved, Admired, Abandoned,
Formidable, Isolated, Holy and Moveable,
Mystical, Protected,

“Set Apart.”

I could swim to Chile
if I wanted
because I am a demigod.

I rule all plants, animals, and
the sea,
the stories under the surface of my skin.

Say that my ancestors swam
great lengths, freed themselves
of great troubles,
decided when
they would or would not
drown. Dove

into watery
isolation
for the sweet
solitude
that is the precious
air
of this life.

The sky, the ocean, and I
look blue today,
but I tell you we are not.

Lisbon's Tears

Lisbon's tears drip
onto each red tiled eave

like birds that die early
from interrupted flight,

from so much trust
pinned to a pane.

A few seconds
beside the open shutters,

above the funiculars,
then, onto the cobbles.

What little fado,
what little feathered wing

in perse pools
aside the riven furcula.

Goya's *Y No Hai Remedio* (1810-1814)

His eyes are covered by shirtcloth.
Yet silent, they do not rest.
His ears see the things that should not be seen
and the smells of death.
He feels a heaviness near his leg.
It is not trickling down
dead. It is death.

Aperture

Standing in the doorway of our own heart, we feel a cold surface.
Its corners, its edges, its smoothness wanting of more texture.

I broke my leg once and wanted so badly to touch the bone.
To see it pushing against my skin was not evidence enough.

In matters of love, how do we determine which will soothe and which will sadden?
I want to touch my own heart which I am told is not cold, but warm and full.

In order to do that, I would have to cut away at the flesh
with a sharpness, something less blunt than doubt.

The Architect

Her hands are like the roots of our old magnolia tree covered in silk—
smoothing, braiding, bending into ropes and tails and fountains.

My sisters and I have hair like Gaudi's Sagrada Família.

How much longer will it take to make us half as beautiful as you?

Face forward, she says, scoops all my hair into one hand
to one side, making baby hair along the edges.

The Problem of Causality

is the way you perceive time.
Let me outline a few aspects.
As I see it, the empty tomb
bears my family name.

The paradox of time
is that it is there...
central to your glance
backward, always beyond—

no new beginnings.
As in Nietzsche's Eternal Return,
everything speaks: the threshold itself
layered with time, intensity,
presence. Visited.

Flying through a Mountain

I shared a porthole once
with a grease spot so large
that it covered the island
of Cuba. The Dominican Republic
dominated my right eye,
and Haiti was lost
to the waters,
to the high tide,
to the great quake
of a bird I imagined was first named
on the sands of Jacmel.

Above deck,
I saw my bird clearly.
There was no beeswax in his feathers,
those tawny locks, and why would there be?

He held a large aloe leaf
in his beak,
covered me
from the burning sun,
rinsed his feathers
against my cheek,
lifted me high enough
to see Cienfuegos
and those starving barbudos
who promised
so much.

He showed me just how much el Che
had overcome.

I wheezed
and looked at my hands.

He turned
into a Portuguese
man-of-war
(which I thought was random)
and began to sing of the pain
we all endure.

*Who is sad forever
will never be like the one bird
who rises from the cinders, but
like the lark who dips into the pelago
never to reappear, having only ever searched for
that one elusive thing.*

It was
almost as if we were flying,
except he was holding me
by his tentacles
and I felt each one.

Then, he bade me fly
to Ponta do Pico and not to stop
until I reached São Miguel.

Until nightfall, I flew.
Sores on my sides,
I saw stars above and
lava below. I
belted a grateful chorus
when I came to the Lagoa do Fogo
because I did not fall.
I did not fall.

And the isle
was as green
as the quetzals
I'd left behind
before I boarded that ship
I thought would take me some place.

*It is a long way to be happy
if you do not plan for the trip,*
I replied to Noone
because, I thought,
Noone is listening.

Never go back, he said.
His eyes, large orbs full of the future.
His eyes were large orbs full of the future.

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VITA

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