


Requiem for the Orchard

A K R O N S E R I E S I N P O E T R Y



Requiem for the Orchard

Oliver de la Paz



The University of Akron Press
Akron, Ohio

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All inquiries and permission requests should be addressed to the Publisher, the University
of Akron Press, Akron, Ohio 44325-1703.

14 13 12 11 10 5 4 3 2 1

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

de la Paz, Oliver, 1972–

Requiem for the orchard / Oliver de la Paz. — 1st ed.

p. cm. — (Akron series in poetry)

ISBN 978-1-931968-77-5 (alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-931968-74-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Title.

PS3554.E114R47 2010

811'.6—dc22

2009043757

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American
National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed
Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48–1984. ∞

Cover: Detail from “Light II” by Andie deRoux. © 2010 Andie deRoux, licensed by
Grand Image, Ltd.

Requiem for the Orchard was designed and typeset by Amy Freels. The typeface,
StonePrint, was designed by Sumner Stone. The display type is Avenir.

Requiem for the Orchard was printed on sixty-pound natural and bound by
BookMasters of Ashland, Ohio.

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For Meredith and for Lucas

In Defense of Small Towns

When I look at it, it's simple, really. I hated life there. September, once filled with animal deaths and toughened hay. And the smells

of fall were boiled-down beets and potatoes
or the farmhands' breeches smeared with oil and diesel

as they rode into town, dusty and pissed. The radio station
split time between metal and Tejano, and the only action

happened on Friday nights where the high school football team
gave everyone a chance at forgiveness. The town left no room

for novelty or change. The sheriff knew everyone's son and despite that,
we'd cruise up and down the avenues, switching between

brake and gearshift. We'd fight and spit chew into Big Gulp cups
and have our hearts broken nightly. In that town I learned

to fire a shotgun at nine and wring a chicken's neck
with one hand by twirling the bird and whipping it straight like a towel.

But I loved the place once. Everything was blonde and cracked
and the irrigation ditches stretched to the end of the earth. You could

ride on a bicycle and see clearly the outline of every leaf
or catch on the streets each word of a neighbor's argument.

Nothing could happen there and if I willed it, the place would have me
slipping over its rocks into the river with the sugar plant's steam

or signing papers at a storefront army desk, buttoned up
with medallions and a crew cut, eyeing the next recruits.

If I've learned anything, it's that I could be anywhere,
staring at a hunk of asphalt or listening to the clap of billiard balls

against each other in a bar and hear my name. Indifference now?
Some. I shook loose, but that isn't the whole story. The fact is

I'm still in love. And when I wake up, I watch my son yawn,
and my mind turns his upswept hair into cornstalks

at the edge of a field. Stillness is an acre, and his body
idles, deep like heavy machinery. I want to take him back there,

to the small town of my youth and hold the book of wildflowers
open for him, and look. I want him to know the colors of horses,

to run with a cattail in his hand and watch as its seeds
fly weightless as though nothing mattered, as though

the little things we tell ourselves about our pasts stay there,
rising slightly and just out of reach.