

12-2011

## **“Oye: Words are One Big Mind” A Collection of Poems**

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OYE: WORDS ARE ONE BIG MIND  
A COLLECTION  
OF POEMS

A Thesis

by

SAMUEL ARIZPE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Texas-Pan American  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

December 2011

Major Subject: Creative Writing



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December 2011



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2011



## ABSTRACT

Arizpe, Samuel. Oye: Words Are One Big Mind. A Collection of Poems. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), December, 2011, 76 pages, 13 references.

Oye: Words Are One Big Mind. A Collection of Poems comprises forty poems arranged into three sections.

It is preceded by a critical introduction in which the author discusses: 1) the childhood provenance of his love for language; 2) how his Latino linguistic, religious and cultural roots from South Texas set him on the path of poetic discovery and contextualized his poetic style 3) the influence of early Chican@ poets upon his poetry; 4) commonalities of Latin American poetry in his own work; 5) the convergence of spiritual, social, religious, mystical, and universal issues in his work.





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Peace and gassho to the members of my thesis committee, all of whom stood by me time and time again, patiently listening, sharing their ideas to make my own better: Emmy Pérez, Dr. Elvia Ardalani, and Dr. Deborah Cole.

Also, I extend my gratitude to Mr. José Skinner for introducing me to the wonders and the challenges of translating Latino poets; my vision and my appreciation of Latin American poetry has expanded, and I am better for it.

Thanks to the editors of the following journals in which some of the poems in this collection have appeared:

*Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*: “Clouds Are One Big Mind.”

*Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*: “Kanjizai.”

*Numinous*: “Back to Where.”

*PALABRA: A Magazine of Chicano & Latino Literary Art*: “Kihin,” “La Girl Gang Member of East L.A.”

*Pilgrimage*: “Foam,” “In the World’s Dreams,” “Mujer Anónima,” “Mi Guerrillero.”



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER II.	
CLOUDS ARE ONE BIG MIND.....	26
BUTSU .....	27
HAPPY OBLIVIOUS.....	28
MI GUERRILLERO.....	29
I WILL GIVE YOU.....	30
FOR THE FIRST, THE LAST, THE BEGINNING, THE END .....	31
JACINTO.....	33
IN THE DREAM .....	34

KANJIZAI .....	35
WHEN CHALE GOT QUEER.....	36
TO APPREHEND THINGS .....	37
KINHIN .....	39
IN THE ARAB SPRING .....	40
CHAPTER III.	
JUST A MARIPOSA .....	42
THE AWARENESS THAT LOVE.....	43
LET’S JUST SAY.....	44
THE MAD DASH.....	46
EL ATAVISMO DE LOS PÁJAROS .....	47
SENSEI.....	48
MUJER ANÓNIMA .....	50
CODE-SWITCH LOVE POEM .....	51
SAN FRANCISCO DE ASÍS .....	52
BODHISATTVA .....	53
SAN JUAN DE LA CRUZ.....	54

“FOAM” .....	55
TERESA DE ÁVILA EN ÉXTASIS .....	56
CHAPTER IV.	
BARE BACK.....	58
NOTE TO AMÉRICO WHILE TRIPPING .....	59
PINCHE LIGHTNING .....	60
LA GIRL-GANG MEMBER OF EAST L.A. ....	61
SYNCHRONICITY/SINCRONÍA.....	62
PEONY ALEXANDER WOOLCOTT .....	63
RUAH .....	64
LA ESPOSA .....	65
AMONG THE MORNING GLORIES.....	66
NEW YORKER POEM.....	67
BACK TO WHERE .....	68
TUYO SERÁ .....	69
LA FLOR DE OJAL.....	70
LA FOTO/ES UNA HERENCIA .....	71

SUPPLEMENTARY PAGES.....	
WORKS CITED .....	72
WORKS CONSULTED .....	74
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .....	76

## INTRODUCTION

It is a universally accepted law of reality that nothing about or in life happens in a void. All things, all of reality, all natural and manmade phenomena—including poetry and the writing and dissemination of it—are interdependent and co-exist: so what happens in one area of the world on a local, national, and global level eventually influences people in other parts of the world, including—and especially—poets.

When it comes to this local, national, and global interconnection, no poet—not Shakespeare, not Neruda, not José Luis Borges, not Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, nor Cyril Wong—has ever been exempted from feeling the pressure and influence of being present to the world. In her book, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, Carolyn Forché calls this “the *impress* of extremity upon the poetic imagination” (30) [*italic emphasis mine*].

Poets have felt the pull and the beauty of the world and found it confounding.

They have dealt with the exasperating, always-interesting, mysterious vagaries of existence. They have felt upon their consciousness the pressure of knowing and experiencing racial bias, environmental catastrophes, social injustices, the effects of war and the impermanence of life.

For many poets, life itself is urgent.

Living in urgent times then calls for urgent writing, and they often write about, or in context, of their times, their eras, and their personal, social and national histories. They write not in



isolation, but on behalf of, and because of what their country, their world, their culture and languages—their own lives—inspire them to write.

Gloria Anzaldúa herself, author and poet who hailed from the Rio Grande Valley, alludes to this interconnection of poetic sensibility in the preface to the first edition of her now seminal work, *Borderlands, La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, telling us “I have the sense that certain ‘faculties’—not just in me but in every border resident, colored or non-colored—and dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened” (19).

Anzaldúa was referring, of course, to her own unique experience of living in, straddling, two very specific border worlds, one English-predominant and the other Spanish-predominant, and of her newly-discovered—but hard won—need to find her own roots, ones she could claim for herself on her own terms.

What she says about herself as a border resident I apply analogously to my own poesía, my own poetic faculty, for poetic consciousness—especially if it has suffered, especially if it has come up against the world—often sheds light upon one’s history, one’s reality. Poetry, I have discovered, especially when it stands in solidarity with, and allows itself to be informed by, the current issues of the world, cuts through biases and injustices and effects change and enlightenment because first it cuts through and exposes the biases, whether positive or negative, of the poet. Poesía often affects change and enlightenment in the poet’s own consciousness.

Poetry at its most radical, to use Pablo Freire’s notion of *concientización*, *me concientiza*, raises my awareness of my linguistic, cultural and global roots, to the point that I cannot live without living through these roots—and being informed by them.

This is because, as Jane Hirschfield, a poet and a practicing Buddhist, tells us in her book, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*, “poetry’s work is the clarification and magnification of

being” (vii), and “each time we enter its word-woven and musical invocation, we give ourselves over to...poetic knowing, and to the increase of existence...”(vii).

Poetry, Hirschfield implies, brings an increase of existence: it enlarges my capacity for identifying with and through gender, language, culture, and nation—through life.

William Stafford, an Australian whose poetry I admire for its directness and clarity, speaking about the effort of writing poetry in his book, *Writing the Australian Crawl*, tells us that the poet should not “characterize his effort by predominant reference to other literary works, but from a *resonance* between an individual’s situation and the emerging effects at the time of composition” (38) [italic emphasis mine].

In my life, I experience this resonance as the sound the world makes each day, each night, over and over again, and as a Latino poet, I cannot help but be conscious of it and respond to it the only way I know how, by writing poetry. This resonance is also the accumulation of the suffering of others, and the influence of this suffering upon my own poetic sensibilities and faculties is real.

Through poetry, the world—reality—has entered my consciousness and given me my sensibility and imagination by making me conscious first of being bilingual, or as Gloria Anzaldúa would say, a border resident. I navigated between the world of the Latino and the world of the gringo. I became adept at, and I thrived on, switching linguistic and cultural codes.

### My Latino Heritage Marked Me Toward the Word—Toward Poetry

The truth is that I have no distinct memory of exactly when I became bilingual, but already by the age of three I had acquired two distinct maternal languages, Spanish and English, and I was aware of when and how to use them.

I know this because I have a tía who attests that whenever my abuela Simona—an émigré from Mexico by way of Marfa, Texas—took me with her by bus into downtown Houston to run errands, I would engage in English in spirited conversations with the bus driver and other passengers, but speak to my grandmother or answer her questions strictly in Spanish.

A memory of a few years later also confirms that these two maternal languages continued becoming organic and fluid and important to me, and that eventually one of them became predominant. Walking into town with a friend, as our mothers walked ahead of us comadreando in Spanish, suddenly I heard my mother utter a series of very foreign sounds that nevertheless had her peculiar stamp on them—and I understood them: English!

I thought, but how can she speak *my* language, *my* English if Spanish is hers?

I know now that this linguistic interplay of mis lenguas maternas is how I first began to individuate myself and process the world I was encountering, and exploring the world that was already challenging me. Inhabiting their two worlds, the tension between them awoke in me the need to link words to ideas and gave me the ability to do so. My mother tongues English and Spanish gave me my first experiences of those aspects of language that are to this day—simultaneously, mysteriously—an internal part of me, yet external. They show me and bring the world to me, and I know and interpret the world through them. Having two mother languages has made me private and public, personal and social.

Spanish gave me my musical, visceral and rhythmic sense of language. English became my language of ideation, for presenting myself and interacting with others.

This taking on of language, of course, did not happen in a void, but in context of my own Latino culture, with its own unique South Texas flare and sabor Latino in Ganado, a hamlet in the Coastal Bend area of Texas.

For example, my mother—born in Texas to first generation Texans from Mexico—knew how to distinguish between an actual physical illness and that affliction commonly known among Latinos as mal de ojo, the onslaught of negative energy which manifests in one's body: she simply took a raw huevo and, while persinándome, passed it over my body while praying Our Father's and Hail Mary's. She would then crack open the egg and leave it overnight in a glass, usually under my bed, and the next day, upon inspection, if the egg was hervido, cooked, she took it as a sign that the negative energy had indeed left my body—and almost always by then it had.

Some people mistakenly call this brujería, but it is not witchcraft; it is the perfectly natural practice of natural healing that relies on prayer and faith, and this ritual is emblematic of how many Latinos in South Texas experience life: as energy, an interconnected organic reality, a network of meanings that transpire on many levels in various ways.

To this day, here in el Valle, and wherever Latino culture thrives, some Latina women feel impelled to reach out and touch a physical characteristic they admire, usually in children, that they find beautiful or strange, lest their energy enter the person admired, misroute itself and become obtrusive and disruptive. Though more commonplace among Latinas, it is not restricted to women. I myself went up to an elderly woman in a restaurant the other night and asked if I could admire—touch—her wavy snow-white hair.

Also, from a very young age, because I heard my family speak of it, I knew the name for evil in the world: el diablo and the less scary cucuy. He was everywhere and if one detected el mal olor de azufre, that malodorous hint of sulphur, it meant he was prowling and one should be wary. My cousin Barbara from Palacios one winter saw him standing in the doorway to her

room. He spoke in a deep, stentorian voice; wore a long top hat and his eyes shined bright green in the dark. She had disobeyed her parents and thus merited herself a visit from him.

And I learned that life was suffused with the divine; that before all else, when traveling, I should say, “Nombre sea de Dios,” in the name of God. I learned that when projecting my plans for the future I should say, “Si Dios quiere,” if God wills it. I learned to look for, to comprehend, to perceive the signs of a divinity that was omnipresent and active: in the clouds, in the rain, the wind, the sun, in the synchronicity of events.

Once during a violent hailstorm that hovered ominously over our house, my abuela Victoriana reached for her giant glow-in-the-dark rosary and simply chucked it outside into the rain with an incantatory, “Nombre sea de Dios,” in God’s name, and instantly the rain stopped.

I still strongly identify with nature, and this shows in a poem like “Synchronicity,” which contains strong natural images: “under a sparkling twilight sky”; “a dying whale slaps the water with his tail over and over”; and “a monk measuring the path of light and a blue heron standing on one leg” (62). The mantra-like “Kanjizai” also has a speaker that is strongly nature-identified, and offers up images such as peonies that are “red, glinting and still,” and “trees, green leaves, and tall grass” (35). These are poems whose speakers are quite conscious of nature and somewhat pantheistic: speakers who look for and comprehend the divinity within the “various forces and workings of nature” (American Heritage Dictionary 898).

But what imbues these poems with my own particular religious, mystical voice is that they go beyond nature, beyond comprehending it. They tend toward a unity that, while not abandoning nature, transcends it and flows into a more universal space, a universal amplitude.

I learned too the importance of dreams. Dreams, I was taught, linked me to the deceased that went before me marked with the sign of faith. Through the medium of dreams relatives

came to visit me and took me to visit them. Thus I experienced the most natural link between life and death, between the visible and the invisible. Thus I inherited my love for the surreal language of dreams, which shows in “Teresa de Avila en Extasis” (56) in which the great Carmelite saint and reformer, feeling herself drawn into nature, *se deja llevar sin orden aparente*, breaks with the order of things, and becomes, ironically, more present, more in the moment, more Buddhist.

It also shows in “In the Dream,” in which, through shifts of time from present to past and back again, the speaker juxtaposes a timeless connection between the past real and what is real now; between light and darkness; above and below: “I see my sister as she was when I died / sitting in the evening grass, in the sun / arranging her skirt, it reminds her / of an undulating creature of the deep sea, / floating and billowing away / into the silence and the thickness of the sea” (34).

I also heard dichos, adages that had been passed on to my mother and father from their elders. “No hay un mal que por bien no venga,” that which is bad can result in good. “Cada cabeza es un mundo,” every mind is a world unto itself. And: “No hay mejores consejos que los que la vida te da,” there is no better advice than what life itself gives you. Whatever the occasion, they were meant to give me wisdom and insight. They formed in me the conviction that at its core life is sapiential, and can be experienced as wisdom and story. That I can apprehend the sheerness, the wisdom and the depth of life. That I can apprehend how ironically beautiful existence is, if I allow my consciousness, people, and events—poetry—to expand me.

So if I have a proclivity for poetry now it is because I first tasted life as a bilingual, bi-cultural code-switching Latino, which means, of course, that I began experiencing it so intensely that it expanded my consciousness and marked it toward the word—toward poetry.

### I Stand in Solidarity With the World As a Living Body—a Poet

The result of the influence of this net of reality upon my poetry is to make it primarily a poetry of witness, a poetry that has become aware of, and must respond to, the presence of extreme social injustice and the oppression and marginalization of individuals or whole groups of people by governments and institutions. As a living body—a poet—I feel I have no choice but to stand in solidarity with the world, with others who themselves inhabit what I inhabit, experience what I experience, and know as I know that life is at once wondrous, full of contradiction, mundane, boring, difficult, transparent—and always, everywhere, impermanent.

This is why I now try to emulate the poetry of those Latino poets from the sixties and early seventies, poets like José Montalvo, Angela de Hoyos, and Abelardo “Lalo” Delgado, poets who experienced the state of the Mexican-American community at its nadir—a state so urgent that it did not allow them time to romanticize it: for it was what existed for them at the time of composition. It was their world, their reality.

In *Chicano Poetry: A Critical Introduction*, Cordelia Candelaria asserts that poetry of this time “was...protest poetry” (40), a “poetry characterized by an intense concern for the nature of Chicano identity (41) and “quintessentially moral” in that its primary purpose was...to instruct the world about raza experience and the Chicano worldview” (41).

The poetry of Delgado, de Hoyos, and Montalvo and others like them appeals to me because it identifies with and stems from a community, and because that community is first experienced by them as family—with real social and linguistic roots, a family with its own reality, its own suffering—just as I did. Their poetry was a reaction to unjust times and social

injustice. I do not compare myself to them, but like Abelardo, de Hoyos and Montalvo, I lived through those times in my own way.

During the sixties and early seventies, the situation of Chicano poets like Montalvo, de Hoyos, and Delgado was the state of the Mexican-American community, a state so oppressive it forced these Chicano poets to face it, for it was what existed at the time of composition: it was their Chicano reality.

One of the characteristics of their poetry which I admire is “a high incidence of poems built around imperative verb constructions...to express command, strong with desire” (41). This characteristic of imperative verb construction especially shows, and is the main poetic device that carries, and provides, the power to de Hoyos’, “Go Ahead, Ask Her,” a poem anthologized in *Hecho en Tejas*, immediately enthralled me, and enthralls me still:

.....is it / not true / that when / a woman / cries / all the / gentlemen /console  
her / but when / a wife / cries / she cries / alone? (Gilb 237)

There is no figurative language in this poem: no metaphor, no simile, just directness, and this is fitting: de Hoyos lived in a time when the Chicano community was hard pressed to confront its reality, to change, to take pride in the nature of Chicano identity.

Whereas “Go Ahead, Ask Her” stands out for its directness and sparse language and for the courage with which de Hoyos holds a mirror to the Chicano community, the first salient feature of Delgado’s poem is unbridled anger which flares up in its superbly flippant title, “Stupid America.” It ends with a most arresting image, a haunting one: “stupid america, / remember that chicano / flunking math and english / he is the Picasso / of your western states / but he will die / with one thousand masterpieces / hanging only from his mind” (Gilb 174).



Poetry from this time strongly identified with the community, with its needs and its suffering. Whether in the form of a woman and wife in de Hoyos' "Go Ahead, Ask Her," the consciousness of the Chicana@ poets was often informed by communitarian concerns, and that consciousness was often reflected back to the community—through their poems.

Montalvo's "The Barrio Revisited" inspires me now as much as when I first read it. Instead of relying on external descriptions of the barrio's buildings and streets, the poem advances and reveals itself by focusing itself on *la gente del barrio*. As though to stress their individuality Montalvo names each one of them: Señor Murillo; Doña Margarita; Ture; Junior Moreno; Letty; Nona; Fred Mireles; Rosita; Charlie. Montalvo shows that all community, because it comprises people, and these people have history, is alive. It has names. And poetry knows this.

#### Resonances and Commonalities With Latin American Poetry

So, if experiencing my Latino family and linguistic culture so intensely expanded my consciousness and marked me toward the word—toward poetry—and poetry in turn has brought me into contact with other poets from other times, whom I recognize as kindred, is it possible that my own poetry reflects characteristics of movimientos in poesía latinoamericana, characteristics that have been there all along?

I ask because for some time now I have felt running through my poems a zumbido, an undercurrent of something "else," as it were, that—though not overt—has felt to me just as visible and present as the contenido of my poems themselves. I have for some time now suspected that though I write primarily in English, there are some Latin American elements in my poetry. But until I took a course on Latin American poetry this past summer, I did not have the

language to define this buzzing that flows through some of my poems, in some more intensely than in others, poems that feel hybrid, bilingual, mestizo.

Now I know that these mestizo hybrid poems reveal aspects of movimientos from past épocas barrocas, románticas, y en ciertos casos, hasta vanguardistas, and that these elements—of image, diction, and syntax—emerge from my Latino poetic subconscious and reveal themselves as commonalities with Latin American poetry.

Take for example my poem, “Santa Teresa en Éxtasis,” a poem I wrote a few years ago:

Santa Teresa en Éxtasis

There appears—trembling—the abundance that appears  
With rain; and in the field, in the green of the stalks  
Of the field, in the wind that moves the stalks, in the weeds  
Between the stalks, a cloud shining, the sun, and the light  
In the sun, and the cloud—in the orange and the lining  
Of the cloud—so still, so black, so gray...(56)

Composed entirely in English, with the exception of the title, there seems to be something particularly different about this poem’s English, and like that teacher who censured me for speaking Spanish in grade school, at first I resented this poem, for something about it defied in its own way a full English immersion. Though written in English, it speaks in Latino.

Then, in *Momentos cumbres de las literaturas hispánicas*, edited by Rodney Rodriguez, I chanced upon “En Perseguirme Mundo,” a poem by Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz, described by Rodriguez as “heredera digna de la tradición de Góngora y Quevada en el Nuevo Mundo”:

¿En perseguirme Mundo, qué interesas?  
¿En qué te ofendo, cuando solo intento  
poner bellezas en mi entendimiento  
y no mi entendimiento en las bellezas?  
Yo no estimo tesoros ni riquezas;  
y así, siempre me causa más contento  
poner riquezas en mi pensamiento  
que no mi pensamiento en las riquezas...(Rodriguez 352)

And therein I recognized what about my poem is different, almost antiquarian: it has in it some of the same características generales de la literatura barroca that Sor Juana's poem does.

For example, its lush language—"...in the field, in the green of the stalks / of the field, in the wind that moves the stalks, in the weeds / between the stalks"—is the diction of a voz poética barroca that is efectista, theatrical and dramatic, one of the general characteristics of literatura barroca. The sheer repetition in my poem—"In the lining / of the cloud, in the life, in the nothing and the cloud / in the swaying, the wind, the horizon of wind"—creates a sense of hibér-baton de naturaleza, which conveys what Santa Teresa de Avila experiences: a rupture of the natural, logical order of things.

This brings us to another general characteristic of la lírica barroca: las cosas no son lo que parecen. Santa Teresa de Ávila, in her ecstasy, sees the truth, sees things as they are, and in this it is like el desengaño barroco, which believed that our senses deceive us, and that one must struggle to see through the artifice of "reality." Yet hers is not about disillusionment, but an affirmation of "reality" and thus the body: truth comes through the senses, she affirms, and instead of

containing a hint of falsehood, nature, life, is good—it does not hide anything, not even the divine.

Also, la concatenación de descripciones cromáticas in my poem one after another layers the poem, and this amontonamiento, a piling up of descriptive language, challenges the reader to desentrañar, to get to the bottom of, to unravel, the poem.

Esto también es una característica de la lírica barroca.

Another type of poem I write has a sense of intense subjectivity and, as Rodriguez says in his *Momentos Cumbres*, “sigue los instintos de la imaginación y el gusto particular” (359), it follows the instincts of the imagination and of particular preference of “el yo poético”, that lyric, subjective voice of the actor-speaker, and in that respect es de poesía romántica. It focuses on, and delights in, the rhythms of nature while enjoying its “afán por la belleza lírica” (361), its eagerness for lyric beauty:

#### El Atavismo de los Pájaros

No one knows why one dream does not

Impinge upon another, or why a Mourning Cloak

Touches an Eastern Tiger, but I suspect

The mind: circumspect, with comprehension

Inviolable and beautiful as the sun, it is like the stillness

And the silence of the fields...(47)

What marks this poem as similar to those of la época del romanticismo, especially like that of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer is, of course, el subjetivismo y el individualismo of el yo poético, whose subjectivism shows in his preference for chromatic description and images: “a Mourning Cloak / touches an Eastern Tiger”; “comprehension / inviolable and beautiful as the

sun”; “blackbirds coalesce with grackles over grain”; “they carry with them the earthen colors / of the fields.”

The darkness, the blackness of the mourning cloak paired against the orange of the Eastern Tiger; the brightness, the white of the sun; the black of birds hovering over the gold and yellow of grain, and the earthen, dark colors of the fields: through them, like the symbolists who, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, “aimed for a poetry of suggestion rather than of direct statement” (327), el yo poético in this poem obliquely constructs an ambience of feeling.

This use of cromatismo shows up in Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer’s “Rima IV,” en la estrofa dos: “Mientras las ondas de la luz al beso / palpiten encendidas; mientras el sol las desgarradas nubes / de fuego y oro vista” (Rodriguez 421). Ondas de luz, waves of light: white or orange. Encendidas: burn-ing, thus red or dark red or orange. De fuego y oro vista: fire red, and the yellow and golden hue of gold.

Bécquer’s descriptions hum with energy of color—they touch, and concretize and render less abstract the phrase, “habrá poesía.” Likewise, in my poem “Atavismo,” this use of cromatismo, chromatic layering, bolsters the abstract notion of mind, an idea emblematic of serenity, of a divine order to things, and of impermanence.

Another característica of la época romántica in “Atavismo” is the assuredness with which el yo poético speaks of, and identifies with, Nature. At first pass we see him observing, silencio y pasivo, but look again: he is quite wholly engaged in being of the physical world, he apprehends its beauty.

Beauty, the dissemination of it, is a very important notion in poesía romántica Latina.

Just as the speaker in Bécquer's "Rima IV" has internalized poesía and sees it in organic quotidian terms—las ondas de la luz; el aire; springtime—el yo poético in "Atavismo" is wholistic: he *hears* the sound of Harvesters oscillating above the mist; he *sees* birds shooting straight up into the sky; he *registers* them as soaring, spiraling, curling like folds of grace.

Este yo poético romántico hace una sinestesia.

Pero también surgen elementos vanguardistas en my poesía, elementos no concentrados tanto en juegos de técnica como en la mezcla de imágenes cotidianas y mundanas con imágenes y detalles que parecen existir bajo o más allá de lo mundano. En poemas como estos, los dos mundos se yuxtaponen. Como dice Nicolás Guillén, vanguardista cubano en "Balada de los abuelos," "los junto," "los dos gritan, cantan, lloran" (Rodríguez 719).

This melding of real and surreal is especially apparent in my poem, "Bodhisattva" (53). One sees the horrors of wars in this poem: accusations, loss of innocence effected by "men with big hands" on hills; screams as bodies not souls are torn open; babies untimely born blood-less and bloody. Then there emerges what marks it as especially vanguardista en estilo Latino: el yo poético lamenta un agotamiento universal, un inescapable ennui: "¿si todo es un vacío, será que Nada sabe que esto sucede?," "¿Nada jamás ha sentido nada?": If all is a void, does nothing know what happens? Has nothing ever felt anything? The speaker laments a universal exhaustion, an inescapable ennui.

The feeling of compassion in "Bodhisattva" is similar to the realistic, social, and universal existential sentiment of Cesar Vallejo's "Los Heraldos Negros." Just as in "Heraldos" the speaker uses Christian imagery, such as "los Cristos del alma," "golpes sangrientos," "el pan en la puerta" (Rodríguez 653), which gives the poem an air of penetrating sadness, the speaker in "El

Bodhisattva” uses his: “Él dijo: que tome su cruz y me siga”; “ Yo arrojé me cruz al vacío y saqué a Dios” (53).

This is not a vanguardismo deshumanizado showing off its technique, but a vanguardismo con sabor Latino: it is inspired by, takes its identity from identifying with others, especially with those who, as Vallejo says, han sufrido “golpes en la vida tan fuertes” (Rodriguez 653).

This poem and others like it show a vanguardismo of colectividad, a proclivity for identifying with people; being inspired in and through them.

#### Stripped of My Need to Look Before I Jump, Before I Write

In his *Boston Review* article, “The Thing,” Stephen Burt refers to William Carlos Williams’ introduction to his 1944 collection *The Wedge*, in which Williams makes two now-famous statements that I find fascinating for appearing to be contradictory and mutually exclusive, and that resonate with my own poetics 1) “a poet is not a fixed phenomenon, no more than his work,” and 2) “There’s nothing sentimental about a machine, and: A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words. When I say there is nothing sentimental about a poem I mean that there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant” (qtd. in Burt).

At first glance it seemed odd that Williams should compare a poem to a machine, but I looked further, deeper, and I saw that the metaphor leads us to the most important point, that a true poem, no matter what form it takes, no matter how many images it comprises or how complicated its language, must in the final analysis function clearly.

As to the first statement, the poet is a *fluctuating* reality, Williams implies, constantly searching, learning, and it is in his nature to change and to be temporary—yet a poem made by a writer is a small or large *machine* that is not redundant, he says in the second.

But if the poem—itself an extension of the poet— is not a fixed phenomenon, how can it be a machine, a thing?

Williams' assertion is metaphoric, and it points to descriptive clarity: a poem as machine is a poem at work, and a poem at work has no need to be “superfluous or to exceed what is necessary or natural” (American Heritage Dictionary 1038). It has no agenda but to form its own clarity, to become itself.

A machine—a poem—that does what it is designed to do, if it works as it must, lacks nothing and asserts itself by working. It has no extra parts, as it were; therefore it does not need to keep repeating—emphasizing—itself to achieve its importance.

And though it comprises many elements, it is just one thing: a poem.

The point is not that a poem is a machine but that for a poem to succeed, all its poetic elements, its “central energies” (7), as Hirschfield calls them, must together create its clarity, and thus become conscious.

The key to appreciating the two assertions lies in these two words, *not redundant*, because it is my firm belief that poetry—reading, writing, and sharing it—is at its roots the raising of consciousness, the practice of compassionate awareness, and that poetry when it works, when it is not redundant, is about producing and deepening clarity through words.

I also believe that this process of producing and deepening clarity through words is as organic as the human from whom it flows, for that human, that poet, “is not a fixed phenomenon, no more than his *work*” (Williams qtd. in Burt) [emphasis mine].



This means that my work as poet has never drawn from only one source, or one poet.

I still read the collections of Li-Young Lee, and Franz Wright, poets whose work I find luminous, still, and focused on the big questions of life and death. These poets write with a sense of joy without denying sadness, and even revel in a sense of humor. Their work is transcendent yet absolutely present to the moment—to life. Their work is ephemeral and physical as well.

At their best, the “best” poems of these writers have a center that quivers with a love for life and often read as though I were listening in on the poet thinking and feeling his way through “reality” as it reveals itself now: poems like Lee’s “Trading for Heaven” and “After the Pyre,” with their supremely gentle voice, tolerance and amplitude; and Franz Wright’s “From the Past,” in which Wright’s use of the term “God” is so subtle, so direct it, that the term opens up and becomes, quite gently, spiritual, mysterious, transcendent.

I have also discovered the poetry of Jane Hirschfield, and I drink from her collection *After* over and over, for its language—gentle, compassionate and clear—is the result of a mind and a body fully engaged in tasting and taking in and sharing the world.

I especially like her *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*, a collection of essays in which she reflects on the nature of poetry and the poetic process in terms of seeing—and engaging with—the world in the here and now, with clarity. Her essays, reflective in tone, manage to convey to me that the spirit of poetry is a very human endeavor for knowledge, and a standing in solidarity with a world that is at once wondrous and taxing, mysterious and simple.

Hirschfield is a practicing Buddhist and it shows.

I also find the work of Cynthia Cruz quite sharp. Her poems in *Ruin* are beautifully crafted, but not stiff. They are wonderfully, colorfully descriptive. Though small and lyrical, they are charged with organic intensity, and dare I say, a beautiful sadness. Indeed, Her “Twelve in

Yellow–Weed at the Edge” draws me into a voice and the feeling of a voice; then, it opens into an amplitude.

By reading her I learned that a poem’s power or its meaning is not determined by its length, and that a short lyric poem can be intelligently, technically complex but still accessible.

Every time I hear W. H. Auden’s tragic love poem, “Funeral Blues,” I want to be as eloquent as he and as in love.

I am still processing the subtle impact that Arthur Sze’s work in *The Redshifting Web* had on me a few years ago. Because of that collection I overcame my fear of writing about something as abstract as the mind: the mind sees and is what is seen; it is subjective and objective; it is something and nothing, and it has its place in poetry.

Elizabeth Bishop’s “One Art,” and “The Fish” remind me to see and feel and to continue traveling.

T.S. Eliot’s “J. Alfred Prufrock” stripped me of my need to look first before I write.

I go back to William Carlos Williams again and again for his Zen, his intelligent playfulness, and serious focus. In his poems I am reminded “both that poetry be faithful to the thing represented and that it be a thing in itself” (qtd. in Burt).

All of these poets use the same elements of poetry—rhythm, imagery, voice, and form—yet I appreciate how as they all “pursue compression, compact description, restricted diction” (Burt), and most of all, show their “fidelity to a material and social world” (Burt) each manages to produce work unique to them. They give witness to the physicality of the world, and to how poetry is a social network comprised of those who must write poetry, pursue poetry, and share poetry.

As a poet I do not ascribe to a specific poetic principle, but if I had to pick a poem from this collection that best typifies adhering to a principle, it is “Foam” (55), an ekphrastic poem I wrote in response to an abstract painting, and struggled with until I came upon its idea and form: the flowing of one color into another, as ideas flow one into the other. During the composing of this poem I was overcome with a new poetic hunger: to tend to it so that it might be a thing in itself and be faithful to the thing represented.

In the poem colors are nouns and verbs, and I instinctively gave the poem the look of an obelisk so as to ground it—nevertheless, at the end, when *el yo poético* says, “if pressed up against it we ourselves don’t see...Are we wheaten and vitallary, gold or happy, if unlike Teshuvah, unlike Shabbat, we have names for color, but not the colors—no cramoisy, no sage” (55), a circle closes, and the voice becomes tender.

Tenderness is a recurring trope in my collection. It shows up in its concern for fear, sadness, violence, and chaos. The wife in “La Esposa” (65) witnessing her husband’s nightmares after surviving his abduction is emblematic of this tenderness. So is the son who pins a boutonniere on his mother suffering dementia, in “La Flor de Ojal” (70).

### Recent Poetic Discoveries and Insights

Every poetry collection is a plural, a list that comprises single and singular poems. Each poem in a collection, no matter its form or its technique, is composed of elements that poets everywhere use as their creative medium, the cohesive “stuff” of poems: imagery, rhythm, alliteration and assonance, word choice and word order, symbols, meter, individual and collective memory.

Because it is the result of a process, many poetry collections impinge upon the poet's consciousness, deepening and clarifying and expanding his poetry, that is, his ability to see, to hear, to comprehend life, to wonder.

So like a runner whose endurance and aerobic capacity increases the more he runs, my capacity for poetry—for lingering over it, consuming it—has expanded because of this collection. Indeed, because of it, now I am more conscious of when a poem begins to work on me: if I am agitated or distracted, like a temple bell ringing at a monastery it signals me to pause; if I am lethargic and lackadaisical, it calls me to work.

I accept that not every poem I read resonates with me, or that it must, but neither do I summarily dismiss it when it does not; and I appreciate the one that does, for when it surprises me, it is always surprisingly discrete how it registers in me, how it lingers over me and draws me to itself.

*OYE: Words Are One Big Mind* is a convergence of many styles and poetic needs, poems that challenged me to trust them, to stop imposing upon them one view, one cohesive form.

The haiku-like form and tone of “Among the Morning Glories” (66), “La Flor de Ojal,” (70) and “La Girl-Gang Member of East L.A.” (61) let me marry compressed emotion to simple observation.

Narrative poems like “For the First and the Last” (31) and “The Awareness That Love” (43) helped me coax out poetic ideas that were slow to emerge and demanded that I allow them to tell their own story at their own pace. They tend toward the dramatic monologue.

The code-switch form and tone of “Code-Switch Love Poem” (51) and “When Chale Got Queer” (36) I discovered for myself when, out of desperation for a medium to express emotions

and ideas that seemed to be coming at me in both English and Spanish, I launched into both languages.

All the lyric poems like “Butsu” (27), “Kihin” (39) and “To Apprehend Things” (37) are mestizo poems, many of them hybrid combinations of these aforementioned forms, many of them more apt to philosophize in a stream of consciousness, to have a religious skew to them, and to focus on beauty and the dissemination of it.

This collection also consists of collage-like “found poems,” works such as “To Américo While Tripping,” “Let’s Just Say,” “Ruah,” and “New Yorker Poem.” Composed of headlines I found in the online version of “The New York Times,” they are the result of my trying to cull together a poem with no subjective “I.” Chock-full of fractured images and non-logic, with a tone of irony and non-attachment, they are like a whole family in which one sees the same physical attributes, as one detects in these poems something very “Samuel-like”: a very human voice with a very human connection.

One hears this human voice in “Américo” (59) as the gentle, somewhat pleading speaker flips, toughens up and suddenly, ironically mentions love: “Américo, in the anteroom—hell, give me love—I don’t care.” It is also in “Let’s Just Say” (44), in the voice of the father summoning, encouraging his children to freedom, when he says, “Let’s celebrate our dookies the chora, the rhythmic space with no scaffolding, / no marshaled pieces of energy, no talk, just a memory,” and recalls a dream his beloved wife had had: “we were fragrant angels and turtle-heads, / lamb’s ears and blue pearls...” It shows up too in the line from “Ruah (64), “...and not emulate the one who walks / with a bomb strapped to himself the first evening of Passover,” an oblique but important reference to the problems in the Middle East, as well as in the gentle orthodoxy of “the musical taste of an old Jewish man...” We find it in “New Yorker Poem” (67), when after a

series of surreal images, the speaker asks, longingly, “Or are we like songs of a season only, / If after love we do not make ourselves?”

The question is a call for personal and collective fulfillment and self-realization.

Writing these poems helped me re-define for myself experimental poetry through the denotation of the Spanish verb, *experimentar*, which means to experience, and not as innovative technique. So I am no longer afraid of, or dismiss, poetry that is radically different from mine, like work of the experimental Latino poet Rodrigo Toscano.

In poems like “Early Morning Prompts for Evening Takes Or, Roll ‘em!” “Affekt Funeral/Affekt Jamboree,” and especially “Hidden Harvest,” he brings together social and personal elements in a somewhat detached, surreal tone; and the visual, angular look and ratiocination of his poems is so different from my own work that to read any of his poems, I must slow down. I must concentrate. I must give my mind time to focus.

My hope is that by reading him and Latin@ poets like him, I will gain a portal to a new poetic experience of language.

I agree with Lyn Hejinian, who says in the introduction to her book, *The Language of Inquiry*, “The language of poetry is a language of inquiry, not the language of a genre. It is that language in which a writer (or a reader) both perceives and is conscious of the perception. *Poetry takes as its premise that language is a medium for experiencing experience*” (“The Language of Inquiry—Introduction”) [italics mine].

And I count myself fortunate that I am a writer like those of at the end of the twentieth century who, as Mark Wallace observed in his essay “Toward a Multiplicity of Form,” had “an increasingly wide variety of poetic forms and traditions in which to explore their concerns” and

were thus capable of “mixing and reshaping forms from a variety of traditions to fit the needs of their poetry at a given moment” (193).

Whether in English or Spanish or in code-switch, whether short and lyrical, or long and narrative, serious or flippant, or experimental, the poems in this collection reveal an inquiring mind, my thirst for meaning and connection, and a deep curiosity about the world and its multitude of forms, relationships and perspectives.

I take as inspiration what Buddhist author and recovering alcoholic Kevin Griffin says in his book, *One Breath at a Time*, when discussing Right View—the looking at life, nature, and the world as it really is—in his recovery from addiction: “Rather than understanding wisdom as an intellectual process, this language points to the senses, grounding our understanding of the truth in the body, rather than in the mind” (6).

Rather than understanding poetry as an intellectual process, the language of poetry, and of this collection, points me to the senses, grounding my understanding of it, of life, in the body, rather than in the mind.

I love poetry, so I love life.

“POETRY HOLDS THE KNOWLEDGE THAT WE ARE ALIVE AND  
THAT WE ARE GOING TO DIE.”

–Marie Howe



## Clouds Are One Big Mind

Those clouds to the north have been there for hours.

Chatting among themselves, excited to have come from China

To speak Spanish to the migrants heading to Michigan.

And there is a sense among them that this is the year

Things will be different: all the anger in the world

Is going to dry up; the políticos en El Valle will no longer

Think of compadres first; and at last peace will come, the kind of peace

That Buddhist monks practice and set themselves on fire for.

The clouds say, "We are the carriers, not the rain."

I believe them. Clouds keep themselves going because they are

One big mind, a tree-like comprehension, a set of keys.

## **Butsu**

If

I react to you

Like a single man,

With misery

And constraint,

Is

It because I have

Something

To put in place,

Or because,

At last,

I found the poem?

## Happy-Oblivious

What is still also trembles.

This is true of the crescent yellow, the white at dusk,  
Of the vast sky and the vast mind of the sky.

Of two men going for Chinese, and of a friend's fish.

True of the stars we see from behind. They come in, and back up  
Through the doors of our perception.

Their shining—so lavender, so blue—keeps coming.

It never stops.

Happy, oblivious, a dog chews mesquite pods and looks away.

## **Mi Guerrillero**

Eres un sueño que florece y sostiene a los concientizados,  
A los de afuera, a los que piensan a dónde ir y cómo amar en el camino

De luz anaranjada audible.

Eres el sonido del tiempo cuando florece tu mente y pasa  
Flotando hasta llegar al centro y el fondo del río.

El sonido de la noche derrumbándose en la orilla del cielo  
En pedazos de luz blanca y amarilla.

Eres el son de los pasos que toman los refugiados caminando hacia el norte  
Para pasar el checkpoint de la migra en Falfurrias,

Hasta llegar—hambrientos, diáfonos—a la libertad.

## **I Will Give You**

The brilliance of the moon and the night sky.

For an instant your perception and your love

Of the moon and that sky—so cobalt—will hurt,

And the long undulant spilling of it—its white

So bright, so still, you cannot tell: Is it of the moon

Or of the sky? It does not matter. It is of both.

It is of peace—and Peace is nothing.

## **For the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End**

When I was twelve, I went with my father into the desert, on pilgrimage to the ancient Coptic monastery where, from when he was eight-years-old until he was twenty-one, he lived among the monks, praying, studying, and working on ancient manuscripts. He went there as fulfillment of his mother's promise to God, that if she conceived, she would give her child to a life of holiness, in the hope that he might serve the truth, and see clearly the great issues of life and death.

"Already you are on the path of truth," my father said to me. "And just as surely as you eat this fruit, you are my child of truth."

He gave me figs and yogurt to eat, and I passed my time singing songs and listening to the languages of the people passing by. I was happy in my love for my father, in his faith in me, I felt great joy, and I knew I would never lose or be lost.

Inside the sun-baked walls of the monastery, I heard the silence, and the rustling of the monks' robes. I heard their last chant to God at night.

In the silence I noticed the sun at dusk. I prayed that I might someday write about the sun and the million colors of the sun. I prayed for my sister and my brother, who had died one morning on their way to school when a bomb exploded on the bus they were on.

I prayed for stillness.

I prayed I might perceive life and everything that life is.

I prayed that everywhere I would have love.

I prayed that my wife and my children would one day come.

I prayed to receive them with joy.

I prayed to let go, to take in, to receive.

I slept and my peace expanded and I drifted into the desert, then from there, into the world.

On our way home, as I counted the trees, as I was falling asleep, my father leaned into me and whispered, "God will one day take your love and give you love."

Years later, when I was old, I went with my wife to practice medicine in a small village in the mountains of Peru. We lived among those touched by war, and those who were in the war. We treated those who resisted the government by teaching others to read, to think, and to ask questions.

Then one night a grandmother brought us a child whose parents had been arrested and executed for protesting the cruelties of the government against their people. I received this child and my wife received her and we were barren no longer.

In the morning I went to pray at the grave of her parents. I thanked them for their sacrifice and their love. I promised in *Namaste* to love their child, who was my child, to help her see clearly and always serve the truth.

And suddenly I knew the sound I was hearing was the insistent, demanding cry of a child, my child, just-awakened and wanting to eat, to live.

And from across the valley I heard the chanting of the rebels of the Shining Path as they marched to the capitol to launch their last campaign of resistance against the government. They would end the suffering of the poor.

I prayed as my mother and my father had prayed for me when I traveled to America to study medicine and they feared they might never see me again:

I prayed for the First, and the Last, the Beginning, and the End.

## Jacinto

Your drinking buddies found you early one morning floating in a pool,  
Where you'd been gazing up at the stars when you fell asleep.

Your last thought before going under was of us in Junior High going to  
A football game and then afterwards, bored, milling about

The grounds, searching for lost change under the bleachers. We walked over  
To the locker room to get a glimpse of the football players,

And fell silent to what we saw: naked gringo high school boys celebrating their  
Victory snapping each other on the bare ass with wet towels.

I wanted to tell you, Jacinto, but I couldn't, that I was suddenly dizzy, nervous,  
Trembling from watching you watch them. You were so

Enthralled, you didn't feel me reach out to touch your neck. We screamed  
And took off laughing when the coach shooed us away.

Jacinto, I was thinking the other night. I lay in bed on my back, looking up,  
As you had looked up at the sky that dawn. I floated away.

I sank into a great abyss. I saw Love, my notion of love—and I let go.



## **In The Dream**

I see my sister as she was when I died.

Sitting in the evening grass, in the sun,

Arranging her skirt, it reminds her

Of an undulating creature of the deep sea,

Floating and billowing, drifting away

Into the silence and the thickness of the sea.

Then, skipping the wet sands in Maverick,

Near San Francisco, she meets Mark Woo,

The extreme surfer who drowned admiring

The light, the shafts of sun breaking

And dwindling and sparkling down to the reefs,

Down to the lilies and featherstars;

Died knowing, for once, the sea inside.

In another, I see my sister as I was when I died.

She is the evening sun and the evening grass.

In the world's dreams, acorns fall into rivers,

The sound of them rolls through fields,

And we lock in the memory of rain.

The changing of sky is a dream.

When it rains there is a mist among the fields,

And the light—drifting, floating—is undulating and kind.

## Kanjizai

I begin with you, for you are beautiful, silent, and splendid as the western light. And with peonies: they are red, glinting, and still. I begin with trees, green leaves and tall grass, for its surface is direct and undulant. And with the northern wind, for rustling, whooshing past us invisibly, oblivious and light, careless, chaotic, and strong, it is hesitant, determined. I begin with the force and the color of the cloud, its irony, its white, its imposing gray and watchful eye, its wisdom, its need to share, to drift sleepily, it is constant, it is evanescent. And with dusk, streaked gold, yellow and blue and spotted orange, it is so vibrant, and the mist: gentle, cold, and light, it is on the hills, and the houses of the hills. Its sound climbs the hills, and is small. And with great birds of the sky: the hawks, the doves, dipping easily, graceful: they glide away, oblivious, joyful, their paths continuous, changing and true. And with the sparrow, for it hops onto the bath and drinks. And the dog and the cat, their friendship, their enmity is symbiotic, neurotic and pure. And with night, anonymous and still, and the thickness of the night, and the stars, they are a sense of time, and a splendid, a beautiful: they are.

## **When Chale Got Queer**

One night when Chale was ten he saw his teenage cousin have sex with a handsome cholo on a couch. They were whispering, glancing over to him from across the room to make sure he was asleep, but Chale had draped one arm across his face so they couldn't tell he was pretending, just to get a peek at them. His prima slipped off her shoes, pulled her skirt up and slid onto the cholo, and at first they just lay still, forehead to forehead, but then, grunting and thrusting, they went at it, like they were going everywhere and nowhere. Then it happened: the big naked cholo glanced over and locked in on him. Chale felt a flutter, a new quivering up inside his ass, and returning the look, he got wet, feeling himself sliding onto that pinche cholo—hell onto all the cholos of the world—and tasting himself the first time, and all of them, Queer.

## To Apprehend Things

When

I wake up

To the brightness

Of the winter moon,

My first thought

Is not

That life

Uponds the order of things

Through chaos,

Nor that in heaven

The only sound

Is the snapping of fingers

And the rumbling of a mind.

Or that in the time

It takes

To apprehend the self,

Time dissolves

Into

A unity of the body.

It is  
That when a crane  
Topples across a New York block  
When  
It breaks away from its anchors,

Tibetans  
Walking across mountains and rivers  
To visit their children in China  
Are then shot.

It is  
Of the woman who dreams of peace  
And moves  
From the city to a small town  
With her new husband, and is then abused.

It is  
That though  
There is no secret between us  
And reality,  
To apprehend things  
Just as they are is still a miracle.

## **Kinhin**

My perky neighbor, a single mom abused as a child,  
Has started walking ten miles a day to raise money  
For Haitian earthquake victims, adult migrants and  
Orphans in Reynosa.

Unlike her, I do not happily achieve  
The depths of a hummingbird, exert  
Power over death, or make a difference  
In a day.

But when she walks by, I take comfort in her joy, I  
Breathe like an egret and wish for stillness, I walk  
Into what the real world feels.

## **In the Arab Spring**

Refugees rush past the checkpoint

Into Jerusalem.

The sound of them

Blossoms and floats

Past our minds

Into rivers.

Slivers of yellow light crash

Into the edges

Of the western sky.

There is nothing

That does not come

Because it can.

Nothing in the night sky

But life—

“That Nothing Is Static Or Fixed, That All Is Fleeting And Impermanent, Is The first Mark  
Of existence. It Is The Ordinary State Of Affairs. Everything Is In Process.”

– Pema Chodron.



## Just a Mariposa

I found a drenched butterfly on the sidewalk in El Salvador one night  
After a great rain.

I was examining it under a corner light about the time of the toque de queda  
When a soldier approached me

To ask if it was dead. Stepping in closer, he grasped my hand and pulled me  
Toward him, and peered

At the butterfly. “Did you know that because of the brightness of its wings  
And its delicate body,

In El Salvador mariposa is slang for queer?” he asked. “I didn’t know,” I answered.  
“But right now, in my hand,

Lying still, almost dead, la mariposa is like a dollop of yellow paint.” “Or just  
A mariposa, like you,” he said—then smiled.

## The Awareness That Love

Aware of the beauty of the garden, I stand and give thanks for the power that quivers in it now. A butterfly flits about the citrus trees a few feet above the damp earth, and I feel it was all done in love by the gardener from Chiapas who works here now, who tells me about Edwin, a boy from Guatemala he once knew who died of heat prostration, alone in the brush just north of the checkpoint, his stomach full of parasites.

When he says bicho instead of lombriz, I remember Diego, the seminarian I knew and once loved, who was abducted under cover of night in the highlands of Guatemala and dragged down ravines and up hills and never seen again. The death squad nailed his hands to a tree: a warning to his people to shut up and go their way.

Once, after making love, we lay in his bed, giggling, for down the hall we heard footsteps of his classmates running to class, and then, suddenly, beautifully, he rose again. "Samuel, no one is ever exiled from the garden, ever," he said.

I know that now.

I know that the communion of saints is love. Love in the hands. Love in the feet. Love in the eyes. Love in the brutally busted mouth of a saint.

I do not know God, but I remember you, Diego.

I know that you gently traced a circle around my eyes with the finger you sometimes angrily pointed at others when they said a priest's place is at home. I know that you stood naked at the foot of our bed, crying, that you sat by me when I told you, and only you, of this eternal sadness that I sometimes think love is, and that you asked me, begged me, to leave now, so that I might be safe, so that you might see me again after the war and love me again.

I know what I know now: the little white yellow and green butterflies flitting about are joyous and joyful, living and unconscious, as most beautiful things are.

I know the smell of the earth under the citrus tree.

I know you at the window of our small room, standing, looking out to the hills, and the highlands beyond the hills, thinking, thinking of what it means to choose life now during war, to choose me and your love for me, and the alertness, the awareness that love makes in us who love.

## Let's Just Say

Let's not talk to Amá about oblivion, about broad shoulders or big bats.

Let's just say she tried throwing Apá off a bridge and that a joto  
Cruising Preston Street intervened and wrestled him away from her.

Let's not go to Midnight Mass, or drink chocolate con canela  
Or eat another docena of tamales borrachos. Let's just take in the supple

Drum major from behind through our binoculars, let's notice his small ears,  
And which foot he taps and that he leans his crotch into the rail.

That when the band stops playing, he stiffens up, curls his toes and relaxes,  
And, as though surprised, twitches his nalgas.

Because on Fridays Apá always said, "Let's gamble, let's make this building  
Collapse, and crawl out, let's float past the lotus leaves for a deep drop  
Into American hell."

Let's celebrate our dookies, the chora, the rhythmic space with no scaffolding,  
No marshaled pieces of energy, no talk, just a memory,

A dream that Amá had: we were fragrant angels and turtleheads,

Lamb's ears, and blue pearls, and in the morning, a part of the sky,  
And at dusk, ribbons of birds amalgamate, oblivious, delectable,  
Delirious, wild, and sweet.

## The Mad Dash

I once saw

An orange and white cat dart across

Traffic at full sprint on Sugar Road.

The impact

Of slamming into the tire

Of a passing car sent him spinning

Back across

The street like a pencil.

I looked

In the rear view mirror expecting to see

Him dead, but he was gone.

He took refuge

In the nearby

Orchard and sat still for a while,

Pondering.

Then he got up to try his mad dash

To oblivion.

## El Atavismo de los Pájaros

No one knows why one dream does not

Impinge upon another, or why a Mourning Cloak

Touches an Eastern Tiger, but I suspect

The mind: circumspect, with comprehension

Inviolable and beautiful as the sun, it is like the stillness

And the silence in the fields. There, the

Sound of Summer Harvesters oscillates above the mist;

Blackbirds coalesce with grackles over grain

And shoot straight up into the sky, soaring, spiraling,

Curling like folds of grace, like chimeras drifting

In the air. They carry with them the earthen colors

Of the fields, form words for Impermanence to define

Itself—to float across the world, our sun, the mind.

## Sensei

If I  
float up  
Into the stars  
And stay there  
Until you come home,  
It is because  
Of the forty Long-billed  
Curlews  
Foraging at the park.  
Small and middle aged,  
They are  
Like a poem.  
Cadging  
On the grass,  
Under winged,  
Curled  
And gray,  
They  
Set  
Them-  
Selves  
Onto the ground,

And glide

Past us

Into

The lake—



## Mujer Anónima

Mujer anónima, I know you: you are neither innocent nor guilty.

You are a young mother deflecting to yourself the blows of a jealous husband because you know if you don't they might go to your children instead. You are a Mexican woman of twenty-nine in Juárez whose voice cracks when you have to beg on sidewalks for pesos from tourists. A woman in Tehran who would work but there is no work. You are old. You are beautiful. You have raised us.

I want a well of living water so I can expunge your suffering.

Tonight sitting under the elm tree, I listen: in the green sward, in the trees, the wind—invisible, undulating—murmurs, whispers that I should lean toward you and clasp your hands so that you, woman, will pull me up from where I am, set me back to life, to where I was, to the only path there is.

## Code-Switch Love Poem

You know que when somebody que nunca te dice algo  
Tells you something, there's nothing left, pero you like it porque  
It disappears, como que it comes from the world.

Pero ese, check it out.

Es como en winter, en la noche the air cambia y cuando los trains  
Y los cars pasan, parece que estan far away  
Y se oye todo bien crisp and clean. Como que I never heard it before.

Como when the colors of the sky

—Azul y negro—se sienten deep y suave como una mano  
Que va por toda mi espalda y los dedos de mi lover on my neck  
Y su boca caliente y fría porque we're kissing and drinking

Coronas and crunching hielos

In our mouth. Me gusta the coolness of his tongue. Me gusta que  
We're in the back of my troca holding hands,  
Cobijados looking at the stars y que me dice, "Papayito que bueno

Que somos cholos

All wrapped up in each other, lejos de everybody en este  
Silencio, en el amor. Pero check it out. Como chingan mis camaradas  
Cuando quieren su mota. Hasta me dan ganas

To run away with you

To west Texas, to Marfa, donde dicen que you can see lights en el  
Horizonte at night, y puedes oir cuando somebody  
Fifty miles away prende el carro. Pero no me voy porque

Tú eres el único para mí

Forever, ese." Luego nos hacemos el amor toda la noche,  
Estamos abrazados and I whisper, llorando, "Me vale madres  
Que termina la vida, ese. I just want to disappear contigo

Forever caliente."

## **San Francisco de Asís**

Y Dios le dice: “Francisco me pediste que te convirtiera en un buen siervo,  
Que te llevara hasta el gran vacío donde no hay ambición mas la ambición  
Del amor, donde no hay muerte, mas que la propia muerte. No soy Nada.”

Y Francisco se ahogó en el Amor.

## **El Bodhisattva**

Los pequeños estallidos en la cocina se detienen, como que me oyen entrar con el intento de eliminarlos. Quiero detener el mundo que me espanta. Y las oigo de nuevo: las acusaciones, las pérdidas de inocencia efectuadas por hombres con manos gigantescas en las verdes colinas de un país, mi país, cuyas colinas son verdosas. Oigo lamentos mientras los cuerpos, no almas, se parten en barrancas, mientras niños en sus madres nacen inoportunamente, exangües, ensangrentados. Si todo que existe es un vacío, ¿es posible que Nada sabe nada? ¿Nada sabe que estoy exhausto, que las madres continúan ante la muerte, que siempre y por dondequiera hay sufrimientos? ¿Será cierto que Nada jamás siente nada? El dijo: Que tome su cruz y me siga. Arrojo mi cruz al vacío y saco a Dios. Ahora cada bebé balaceado, cada mujer violada, cada hombre desmembrado, cualquier persona olvidada, es una flor, un poema, una canción

## **San Juan de la Cruz**

En la oscuridad, oigo los gorgoritos de las palomas, el batir de alas.  
Recuerdo las palabras que dije hace mucho: 'La existencia sí es Nada.'

Paso por mí mismo hasta entrar a Dios. Todo lo que dije de Dios  
Es verdad y no es.

Se vuela como cuerda el sentido de lo que soy.

Acostado junto al hoyo en la pared, oigo el silbido del aire,  
Huelo lluvia mezclada con tierra.

Quiero ver la luz del ocaso, como lo hacía caminando  
Junto al río, anotando mis pensamientos de Dios.

Nadie sabe que me ahogo en Dios.

### **“Foam” (An Epoxy on Resin)**

Here, celadon, like ponceau,  
slides in, translucent, flimsy  
as foam. The jacinth, like  
memory, so albicant, so  
alzuline, swims jessamy  
through narcarant and or.  
Gamboge and eau-de-nil,  
with corbeau, loves ibis, and  
smalts of self, and aubergine,  
undying, stammels puce.  
There somewhere umber  
russels tilleaul and sorrets  
slate. But how can wheaten  
and zinnober whey a  
coquelicot, if there is a  
center, a nigricant knot—if  
pressed up against it we  
ourselves don't see. Are we  
wheaten and vitallary, gold or  
happy, if unlike Teshuvah,  
unlike Shabbat, we have  
names for color, but not the  
colors—no cramoisy, no  
sage.

## Teresa de Ávila en Éxtasis

Far and to the south, the sun, and a cloud that shines the sun

Where the sky—where it is gray—trembles,

There appears—trembling—the abundance that appears

With rain; and in the field, in the green of the stalks

Of the field, in the wind that moves the stalks, in the weeds

Between the stalks, a cloud shining, the sun, and the light

In the sun, and the cloud—in the orange and the lining

Of the cloud—so still, so black so gray; in the lining

Of the cloud, in the life, in the nothing and the cloud,

In the swaying, the wind, the horizon of wind,

Shaped, colored by wind: Nothing, winds and nothing

And the clouds, so much—Nothing: clouds bursting

With rain, touching the stalks, and the stalks, all the walls

Of the stalks dipping, swaying.

“MIND IS LIKE SAND—CONTEXT AND PARADOX.”

—Anonymous.



## **Bare Back**

A bound man  
Says to his illegal self,  
“Tree shaker.”

“No, I am  
A certain uncertain  
Je ne sais quoi,”  
The self says.  
“A solo flight on bare back.”

“I am  
The lights and darks  
Of life  
Punctuated by stillness.”

“An evening sound,  
The last flight  
Of scarlet macaws.”

### **Note To Américo While Tripping**

Make me a millionaire, a curious life, a plane that crashes, a builder of wind-up toys,  
Strip me down to my manners, give me talking head, death with interruptions, Costa  
Rican forests, pink palazzos, and pink hearts, do your carbo-loading Valley style, nibble  
Me before we gorge ourselves, say, 'your layers of devotion, and your scars to prove it,'  
Then an epic down under, get bobbed but not clipped, heard but not soft, Américo, in  
The anteroom—hell, give me love—I don't care.

## Pinche Lightning

Decía mamá, “Eso quiere decir que God’s bowling.”

Pale blue, streaked and white why do you—*invisible*—reside, a miedo en mí, visible, en mis entrañas, and reverberate, and enter and exit, insistente, arbitrario, caótico, terrorist and violador, and knock on doors, y, demonio, con furor rattle homes.

Pinche lightning.

## **La Girl Gang Member of East L.A.**

When the girl gang member of East L.A. comes running to the front yard, and she pummels the wild dog odors in the grass, snorting, and pawing at them like a boxer, and so focused that she flinches, and her ears snap back and she trots off to greet don Miguel, who's taking cool drags from his cigarette at the adult day care, zigzagging, sniffing her way through the grass: she sees me.

## Synchronicity/Sincronía

In the Arizona desert, one immigrant tells another, “Aquí por poquito se ahoga ella,” “Esta es la superficie de retal de postes,” “Aquí nos reunimos al anochecer.”

A thousand miles away, a woman who loves autumn dies in autumn.

In Chicago, a man who lost control of his car accidentally hits three women sitting on a stoop.

A mob drags him out of his car and bludgeons him to death under a sparkling twilight sky.

A dying whale slaps the water with his tail over and over.

In Perú, the American woman accused of assisting the Rebels of the Shining Path sits in a prison in the high Andes, listening to the ringing of bells.

When the sister of a boy gang-raped by men in Afghanistan is herself raped, his family avenges her rape, ignoring his. Later he dies alone of grief in a cave.

A monk measuring the path of light and a blue heron standing on one leg both look up at the very moment of death.

In Machu Picchu a man digging finds robins' eggs. “Are these shells floating in light,” he asks.

**Peony Alexander Woolcott**

Tricky to see it as true yellow, crimson red. Tricky to see it as a cultivar when your  
Thinking's a bowl of beauty, a warm-up rather than love itself, a dream of Himalayan  
Turquoise. To disengage when your memory snatches you, dangles and taunts you  
To save yourself, to fall, to rise up, to re-invent yourself, to go zigzag between outsider  
And insider—like a disagreement, like a surface, like what's below.

## **Ruah**

If you can finger a talisman like a bodhisattva,

Or tap a microphone and clear your throat like Mei-mei

Berssenbrugge, you will probably put on your razzle-dazzle

One bead at a time and not emulate the one who walks

With a bomb strapped to himself the first evening of Passover.

Which is why a series of relapses and collapses could simply

Be a trick of the light, and why no matter how easily it converts

Into press the perils of heavy borrowing, the musical taste

Of an old Jewish man is reassuring to those old enough

To remember, novel to those too young to know.

## **La Esposa**

Every night around 2:00 I see how my husband dreams himself back into the dry plywood box his secuestreros held him in for nine months last summer to extort veinte millones de pesos from us, and every morning I tell him about his nightmare. But, “No,” he says, “that’s you outside looking in.” But he does: he sits upright in bed, hugs his knees and rocks himself over and over, moaning, muttering maldiciones. And then I tug on his arm and he falls back onto his pillow and sleeps on, como que nada. One day when he’s strong I will ask him, “Husband, you make an awful guttural sound when you sleep, does it mean you’re swallowed by the thickness and the clarity of your fear, tu olvido.”



## **Among the Morning Glories**

And coral honeysuckles,

Once it hovers, it is possible:

A colibrí, a picaflor is just a hummingbird.

### **The New Yorker Poem**

How can ancient anecdote be a summer evening by the window  
With Psalms, if attabled with spinning the journey ends in trouble,  
If, courting forgetfulness, at the tattoo shop the virgin king is Romanesque  
And at 17 or 21 has names? Or are we like songs of a season only,  
If after love we do not make ourselves?

## Back To Where

I remember the young rabbit I buried three months ago under the tall orange tree.  
Having crawled out of his yard into mine through a fence, he was nibbling at the grass  
When my dog broke his neck with one clean bite. The high-pitched squeal he emitted  
As he was dying was so oddly similar to an infant's cry that I felt compelled to let it die  
In my hands so as to comfort it, but the comfort was mine and I buried it, remembering  
The practice of Tibetan celestial burial, the cutting of the dead into pieces, feeding them  
To birds so that in nature life can come from death. I imagine the young rabbit's death  
Giving life to the rain falling now, and to the sky, so we will have water for the harvest  
And the drought, so the book of life can spring open with a list of delicate bodies from  
Far-off lands, and of soldiers smiling, waving because they have quit the war, and of us  
Swimming back to where we were: to the wind, the stars, into the silence of the trees.

## **Tuyo Será**

Tuyo será el esplendor  
De la luna y el cielo de la noche.

Y por un instante tu percepción y tu amor  
de aquella luna

Y de aquel cielo tan cobalto  
Te dolerá, y el largo derrame ondulado

De la luna, su blanco tan estilizado  
Que no se puede tocar: ¿es de la luna o del cielo?

Esto no importa.  
De ambos, no es nada. Es de paz.

Y la paz no es Nada.

**Mamá**  
**En Asilo de Ancianos**  
**Y**  
**La Flor de Ojal Color de Rosa**

You were so beautiful, so clear—I pinned it on you in *gasho*.

In the stance—In the pose—Mother touches son—No distance—No worry.

**[La Foto Es/ Una Herencia]**

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