Dying Each Day a Bit More

Dying each day a bit more
cutting my nails
hair
desires
learning to think small
and in the immensity
of stars far
and fixed
in the sky
stained like a fleeing animal
in the sky
terrified by me

translated from the Spanish
by Willis Barnstone

Julia Calzadilla Núñez *Cuba*

Today Is Thursday and I'm on the High Seas

Today is Thursday and I'm on the high seas.
Today I'd like to hide in a music box
and not make you yawn at so much ancient history
since I don't know what I'm doing this short hour under lock and key
and so you don't dribble or banish my name like a fly
always returning to the same upper arm.
I don't want to unpack my rooks, my lancets,
nor break them to learn what's inside.
It's preferable for sure that without twisting the face,
I stay on course, and continue and endure
until I lose sight of the poem's dorsal fin.

translated from the Spanish
by Zöe Anglesey

Rafael Courtoisie *Uruguay*

Nourishment

You are what you eat.

The body that falls to pieces, that is cooked, all food, is exiled hunger. It is cadaverous hunger, straight white humerus, naked with its notches, pierced back, dismembered, taken from the stomach.

The earthenware, the plate from which you eat, the cup from which you drink are the dry spirit of a violent clod, the force or furor of the humus, of the clay mixture that was once also meat and breath.

The nest of the drink is a glass and the nest of thirst is a glass.

On a plate the meat you eat loiters stiffly, lies in truth still alive, although dead and a bloody piece of stew.

But even after eaten, even after swallowed and inside, when emptiness rests on the plate, when absence is left in the saliva, on the same plate, in the empty fountain, the soul swells.

Among what remains, on that plate with the leftover divided meat, lakes of lymph and blood, is the only distraction that was sustaining, like another legged being, luminous, inside the animal.

The lamb or the pig, their matter greasy and viperine, along with the crowned cow, march to the scaffold.

But they will live. They will live like the fish lives in the eyes of the man who eats it for lunch.

The partridge will live. The strange word of the lettuce.

Love for Lunatics

A lunatic is someone whose mind is naked. He has taken off his invisible clothes, those that veil and deflect reality. Lunatics have that shamelessness that turns into fragility and, on occasion, beauty. They walk alone, as any naked person, and frequently also talk to themselves. (*"He who talks to himself waits to talk to God one day."*)

More difficult than covering a naked body is covering a thought. The crazy have thoughts that shiver, bony thoughts, hard like the rock they circle, as if they remained tied by an iron chain of ideas.

The brain of a bird does not weigh more than a few grams, and the part that modulates song is of a size much smaller than the head of a pin, a minute piece of cloth, of biological material that, with a certain boredom, the wise scrutinize under the microscope to decipher in what manner, on such a meager remnant, the score is written.

But long ago, and without the need of a microscope or stain, the lunatic knows that the bird's song is immense and heavy, pure lead that drills bones, that invades sleep, that collapses any roof and there is no cement or beam that could sustain its fullness, its possible size. For this reason some lunatics wake up before sunrise and cover their ears with their own voice, with voices that ooze from inside, from the head.

The thoughts of the lunatic are live flesh, flesh without skin. In the desert of the lunatic's thought the bird is a relentless sun. The song falls like a light and a heat that would bite the lunatic on the very flesh of his nakedness.

But the lunatic's nakedness is intimate: from showing it so much it stays inside. It is an interior condition, it passes unnoticed to the legions of the sane whose spirit is completely covered by basting cloth, thick, braided by customary threads.

The only possible instrument for the lunatic to defend his nudity is love. Love, for lunatics, is a transparent dressing. Those glassy eyes, that amber string they urinate at night, that clamor and the abundant and multiple sentiments that the *benzodiazepines* do not alter, that *Valium* does not diminish, remain intact in the lunatic through the art of love.

It is a hammer, and a spoon and a hole punch. It is everything but a dress, it does not cover only crosses, it does not relieve but glorifies. Love, for lunatics, has texture, demeanor and substance.

The substance is like glass, but it is the glass of a broken bottle.

translated by Rebecca Morgan

Juan Cameron *Chile*

Sails

Sails in the eyes
making a futile search for subterranean paths
when evening falls as it strikes the sand
But now it's December
the days stopped in the port
reflect a stained glass window over the *estancia*
tapestries of a childhood lacking farewell or hurry

Sails in the eyes
flowered light behind doors now bare
The knockers bronzes hands
that despite the rust extend their ghosts
to the city's streets
woven with houses we inhabit
in the land of our unforgotten terrain

But it's not possible for man to know all his houses
nor all his memories
nor to build his streets on a map
nor to graph rubble on top of rubble
memorial over mirrors

Sails in the eyes
& in every house a living room of flower colors
& in each room the sun in the siesta's silence
beyond the back courtyard of childhood

Sails in the eyes
Only the bus panting uphill reaches memory.

Ciphers

Borges 44 years old and I've still not read Montaigne
except for some citations by Martin who's dying on us in Chile
and still the mirror shows no more gray hairs than the ones already known.
Except that
tonight—since I'll not yet be 50—
I'll take my bicycle and a good half bottle of red
and curse the prizewinner for his address at the Academy
as if he were my neighbor.
My street is also called Nobel
and I'll get nowhere along it
except for a few pages of Montaigne
or what people say about Montaigne
before it's too late.

translated from the Spanish
by Cola Franzen

Susana Thénon *Argentina*

The Dissection

something almost sacred
is something almost sacred
something almost
almost sacred
so almost sacred is this something
drawing powerfully the eye
the almost absolute blindness of the people
bearing in mind that in the last analysis
it's almost unnecessary to see to believe in something so almost
so consistently almost
sacred
and it's also that this element or something
has let blood
or almost
and we can appreciate it by the shadow of the almost sacred
on the ground on the ground on the very ground
and resuming the demonstration
we have this something
something, bah, the whole heap
of something almost half sacred
and besides blood-let and hence
and in infancy almost *ad nauseam*
and passing now to other matters this something
refuses with almost all its buttons
to get almost discovered
analyzed pulverized anatomized
in its hindmost inmost causes
that's to say almost inmost because the something in itself
does not defoliate easily
only layer by layer
like artichokes
in winter
and time, ah, time that disjunctive
factor that is almost here running out

and therefore prevents us
from reaching the great why
and the superhow of this something
almost sacred
so almost so sacred
so almost almost
almost so sacred

The Funds of the Treasury

to get to the Treasury funds
first one has to find a Treasury
and enter through the door
or else through the window
or slip a brat through the chink
or slither over rusty skylights
halfopen
perhaps halfclosed

the Treasure is taking a nap
it left word,
—if someone calls tell him I'm taking a nap
—even if it's the Secretary?
—even so
I am the Treasure
and have become a fabulous animal

true I don't figure in Borges' *Manual of Fantastic Zoology*
but I'll figure in future editions
as *addenda*
as last minute news
or like flesh of asterisk
a fabulous animal
that grows when asleep

if they wake him up
or touch him
or attempt to move him elsewhere
he shrinks till he disappears
and reappears years later in remote latitudes
where the cycle is fulfilled inexorably
through man's action
which is grist to history
and therefore fuel to time

when I sleep I grow huge
when I wake up I die

everyone speaks of the funds
and everyone feuds to play inside
play dice hide-and-seek

they discover to no avail that such funds
are like the Caucasus
a place that only exists
for the Caucasians
and there's no way to reach
the scriptwriters of documentaries
without disturbing my nap
and making me vanish
with funds facades and dividing wall

tell them to leave me in peace
if they want peace
but if they want something else
they'll get it in profusion
the fat cows are pure fat
while the lean cows go about nimbly
and can even whistle

I am the Treasure
a fabulous animal
don't touch me
devote yourselves to Ahrt

talk of mysticism
and semantics
meditate under the pyramid
you have so much to do
life ahead
death ahead
and both from the sides
from above
and from inside

philosophize
put on file
hang a cat

I am the Treasure

when I sleep I grow huge
when I wake up I die

leave me in peace

translated from the Spanish
by Renata Treitel

Tomás Harris *Chile*

Hotel King II

The Hotel King. It's dark.
Your body can't be seen. The walls were cracked.
Moisture drips from the ceiling
on our curled-up bodies. It's
dark. And among the figures on the dark cement,
the wet earth is even darker. Rust
from old locomotives peoples the hall, the plaza,
the surrounding streets. It's very dark.
All that remains is the moisture from before, the sterile
curtain of the same old rain.
Among shadows, we're not sure from where,
one shout and then another don't interrupt the silence,
they confirm it, they people it, like
the stars at night. Dead locomotives have
sedimented onto the walls; we crowded there like monkeys,
transforming gray moisture into the tribe's
organic heat. The moon appears like a train's
headlight in the memory of what's lost, like
acid in veins moving downbody into the memory
of what's lost. Among silvered mountains
of trash a teenage whore will look for used needles,
tabs of acid, dried remains of sniffed glue.
It was dark. Among the shadows, one shout and then
another don't interrupt the silence, they confirm it,
they people it, like our bodies
do at death.

translated from the Spanish
by Daniel Shapiro

Edimilson de Almeida Pereira *Brazil*

Plural

I want love to be plural
with two names
and no telephones.

Indissoluble love
can't be found in a place.

Plural love
goes to libraries
and has an extravagant guitar.
In its wake
is the faint trail of fire.

Plural love
got all wrinkled in its youth.
It's here and there.
It came to the city
without telling anyone.

Plural love
had to forego the sea.
It makes itself indissoluble
amidst letters
and churches.

Look at it now! Embarrassed by its own blood.

Guests

The ocean writes letters.
Hands touch
the day's
quick tail.

The crystal on the table.

The music of forks
pushes us
to change the country.

No tender touch
or archived record,
crimes, last names first,
reignite
the silence.

Just these serious,
honest people,
bile,
make up the group
that leaves the factory.

The sound falls silent
on glass.

Not the one from that afternoon
in a landscape
suddenly revealed.

Life
climbs a weed
like a diploma
on the wall.

You can no longer
wound it
with stilettos
or keels.

What remains
is palpable.
We enjoy
its presence.

Impossible to die
without disheveling
the flesh.

Everything else
is simply a visit,
a tuning of watches
and roosters.

Looms

I arrive at the dance
that never happened.

The time of losses
drinks a cup of coffee
and surveys the scene.

The heart
opens
the first aid box.

I insist on the love
of difficult names
in the difficulty
that is love itself.

The time of losses
generates its enemy
in all that it consumes.

I may not understand
the ancient ones
or call the rain,
but I survive
because of these absences.

The time of losses
cannot bear
those who will separate
and meet
at the movies.

The gods
don't know what to do
with that son.
Should we?

The time of losses
goes about its business
with no skill at all,
like leaving something
that finally
we don't lose.

Epitaph

The body lays
his merits to rest.

What they write about him
is a crime,
news with no choice.

I'm not dead.
I read with the eyes
of an other.

The body studies
the extinct ocean.
The soul wanders.

First Letters

The machine of the book
drives me when

I try to deny it. I write
the strange day.

I attend to words
to understand them

for deducing
the precarious world.

Night's science
has a different notebook.

What I compose
illuminates me.

My will struggles
in its aquarium.

translated from the Portuguese
by Steven F. White

LATIN AMERICAN CONTRIBUTORS

Nicomedes Suárez Arauz was born in 1946, and raised in Bolivia's Amazonia. A Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, he is also is a poet, fiction writer, visual artist and critic. Since 1988 he has taught at Smith College in Massachusetts. In 1993 he founded at Smith College the Center for Amazonian Literature and Culture, whose journal, *Amazonian Literary Review*, he co-edits.

Among his poetry volumes are: *Caballo al anochecer* (1978), which won Bolivia's national Premio Edición Franz Tamayo; *Los escribanos de Loen* (1974); *Loen: Amazonia/Amnesis/América* (1997), and *Recetario amazónico* (2001). His poetry has been translated into English, French and Portuguese. In 1973 he formulated "Amnesis," an Amazonian-inspired poetics of amnesia as a structural creative metaphor, an aesthetic which has had international resonance.

Homero Aridjis Born in Contepec, Michoacán, in 1940, Homero Aridjis has published twenty-eight books of poetry and prose. His *Obra poética*, spanning thirty-four years of poetry, appeared in 1994. His work has been translated into English, French, German, Dutch, Swedish, Italian, Portuguese, Greek, Turkish, Serbo-Croatian, Russian and Chinese. Twice the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, Aridjis has taught at Columbia University, New York University and the University of Indiana. He has also served as Mexican Ambassador to the Netherlands and Switzerland.

In 1987 he received the Global 500 Award from the United Nations Environmental Program on behalf of the Group of 100, an environmentalist association of writers, artists and scientists, of which he is founder and president. During the 64th International PEN Congress held in Edinburgh in August 1997, he was elected President of PEN International. He was re-elected President for a second term during the 67th International PEN Congress held in Moscow in May 2000.

Juan Cameron was born in Valparaiso, Chile, in 1947. Like other artists and writers of the Generation of 1970, he suffered in the aftermath of the coup of 1973. After ten years in Sweden, he recently returned to live in Valparaiso. International literary awards include the Gabriela Mistral Prize, the Ruyard Kipling Prize, and the Encina de la Canada Prize. His recent books include *Video Clip* (Stockholm, 1989), *Como un ave migratoria en la jaula del Fénix* (Melilla, Spain, 1992), and *Visión de los ciclistas y otros textos* (Madrid, 1998).

Rafael Courtoisie was born in Montevideo in 1958. A member of the Uruguayan Academy of Letters, he has published poetry, fiction, and essays. His many awards include the Premio Internacional de Poesía Plural (Mexico, 1991), the Premio Fundación Lowe Visor (Spain, 1995), and both the Premio Nacional de la Crítica (1996) and Premio Nacional de Novela (1997) in Uruguay.

Juan Carlos Galeano was born in the Amazon region of Colombia in 1958. He is author of several poetry books, and selections of his poetry have also been translated into German, English and Portuguese. His poetry appears in several recent anthologies, including *Poesía colombiana*, a history of Colombian poetry (CD ROM multimedia, Bogotá, Colombia, 2000); *A poesía se encontra na floresta*, an anthology of Spanish American and Brazilian poets (Brazil, 2000); and *Literary Amazonia: Modern Amazonian Writers* (Florida University Press, 2001). He has also translated several contemporary American poets, including Charles Simic and Sharon Olds. He presently teaches Latin American poetry at Florida State University.

Ana Ilce Gómez was born in Masaya, Nicaragua, in 1945. Despite few economic resources, she studied journalism at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua, and later wrote a weekly newspaper column. Her first and only collection of poems, *Ceremonias del silencio*, appeared in 1974, the same year she began to work for the Nicaraguan government. During the eighties Ms. Gómez was associated with the public relations department of the Banco Central de Nicaragua and for many years directed that institution's prestigious Armando Joya Library.

In 1989 a revised and expanded edition of *Ceremonias del silencio* was published, and the poet was awarded the Orden de independencia cultural Rubén Darío. A supporter of the Sandinista movement against Somoza, Ms. Gómez nevertheless views her own writing as non-political. "I have always written lyrical rather than political poetry, as I believe I do the latter very poorly. The reality of what we have been through is much greater and more profound than anything I can write." She has recently returned to Masaya, the village where she was born, in order to read and write full time.

Tomás Harris, born in La Serna in 1956, is considered one of Chile's most important younger poets. The author of numerous books, he is the recipient of the Premio del Consejo Nacional del Libro y Lectura (1993), the Premio Pablo Neruda (1995), and the Casa de las Américas Prize (1996). He lives and works in Santiago, Chile.

David Huerta, born in Mexico City in 1949, is a poet journalist, critic and translator. His books of poetry include *El jardín de la luz* (1972), *El espejo del cuerpo* (1980), *Incurable* (1987), *Los objetos están mas cerca de lo que aparentan* (1990), and *La sombra de los perros* (1996). In 2001 Copper Canyon Press will publish an anthology of his poetry, *Reversible Monuments.*

Ana Istarú Born in San José, Costa Rica, in 1960, Ana Istarú is a poet, actress and playwright. Author of seven volumes of poetry, three plays, and included in over a dozen anthologies, she is considered among Latin America's most important younger women poets. She has won the Primer Premio Certamen EDUCA, a Guggenheim grant, and most recently the Premio "María Teresa León" given by the Asociación de Directores de Escena de España. Translations of her poetry have been published to critical acclaim in French, German, and Italian.

Ricardo Lindo, born in El Salvador in 1947, was educated in Chile, El Salvador, Spain, and France, and has served as cultural attaché in France and Switzerland. The son and grandson of writers and diplomats, he has published poetry, short stories, and a novel, *Tierra* (1992). His recent books include a volume of short stories, *Arca del cantado* (1988), and a volume of poetry, *El señor de la casa del tiempo.*

Julia Calzadilla Núñez (Cuba, 1943), translates literature and philosophy from Portuguese, Italian, French and English into Spanish. She has won prizes for her poems in Cuba, Venezuela and Germany. She writes and edits books for young people and awaits publication of her book of poems, *Cáscara de Nuez.*

Edimilson de Almeida Pereira was born in 1963 in Minas Gerais, and teaches Brazilian and Portuguese literature at the Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora in Brazil. His recent poetry publications include *Rebojo*, *O homem da orelha furada*, and *Águas de Contendas*, for which he won Brazil's prestigious 1998 Helena Kolody National Poetry Prize. He is also the co-author (with Núbia Pereira de Magalhães Gomes) of *Do Presépio à balança*, a study of Afro-Brazilian popular culture. He directs an ongoing sociological and anthropological research project in Minas Gerais entitled "Minas & Mineiros."

Antonio Jose Ponte was born in 1964 in Matanzas, Cuba. He moved to Havana in 1980, completed studies in hydraulic engineering at the University of Havana, and worked five years as an engineer. He left engineering to write film scripts, completing scripts for two full-length films and a documentary. He then turned full time to writing. His first of many award-winning books was published in Cuba. In recent years books of essays, fiction, and poetry have appeared in Spain, France,

Mexico, and Sweden. In the United States a book of short stories, *In The Cold of the Malecón and Other Stories*, translated by Cola Franzen and Dick Cluster, will appear from City Lights Books. As the recipient of an International Parliament Fellowship, he spent 1999 in Porto, Portugal, completing a novel and book of short stories.

Susana Thénon (1937-1990) was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In 1964 she received a degree in Letters from the University of Buenos Aires. She was also a translator and artistic photographer. Her collections of published poetry include *Edad sin tregua* (1958), *Habitante de la nada* (1960), *de lugares extraños* (1967), *distancias* (1984), and *Ova completa* (1987). Between 1966 and 1970 she studied German in the Instituto Goethe in Buenos Aires and in 1971 received a scholarship to the Goethe Institute in Munich, Germany. In 1971 she began to study as an artistic photographer and soon after entered national and international photographic shows, receiving numerous awards and prizes.

Ova completa (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1987), Thénon's last work, is an irreverent book full of puns and truths. It is a book of transgressions at many levels: linguistic, historical, formal. Her stance against elitism situates her outside the literary establishment. The book belongs to the satirical tradition of Aristophanes, exposing the political and economic dysfunction, hypocrisies and foibles of an Argentine society traumatized by years of lawless rule by military regimes.

Consuelo Tomás (Panamá, 1957) has won Central American prizes for three books of poetry and has been anthologized in the U.S., Holland, Spain, France, Puerto Rico, India, and by UNESCO.

Blanca Varela Born in Lima, Peru, in 1926, Blanca Varela has also lived in Paris and New York. In Lima she directed the Fondo de Cultura Book Store. When her first book, *The Port Exists*, appeared in 1959, Octavio Paz wrote of it as "the work of a poet who, with the simplest words, turned ordinary observations into magical reality." This praise was unique in years before the commonplace term "magic realism" was applied to García Márquez and the boom novel.

A thread of ironic surrealism, characteristic of many French and Latin American poets, runs through her work, but her individual voice goes beyond any school. In more recent books, her poems have become longer, more powerful and complex, yet they have lost none of the early clarity. Entirely devoid of easy rhetoric, each poem is a careful work of art, an important object of the imagination. Some of her other books are *Daylight* (1963), *Waltzes and Other Fall Confessions* (1972), *Selected Poems 1949-91* (1993), and *Animal Concert*, (1999). Her work has appeared in most of the European languages.

TRANSLATORS

Kirk Anderson is an independent translator of Spanish, French and Chinese based in Miami Beach. He has published translations of over 50 writers from more than 20 different countries, including Pedro Almodóvar's *Patty Diphusa and other writings* (Faber & Faber) and half the essays in *For Rushdie: Essays by Arab and Muslim Writers in Defense of Free Speech* (Braziller).

Zoë Anglesey is editor of *Go: Central American Women's Poetry*, *Stone on Stone* and *Listen Up! Spoken Word Poetry*. Her poems appear in *Mantis, Rattapallax, Brilliant Corners, The Seattle Review and Rattle*. Forthcoming are *Gazelle Legato* (poems); *Xumaco: New and Selected Translations from the Americas*, and her translations of Ana Istarú and Ana María Rodas.

Angela Ball is a poet and translator. She teaches creative writing and literature at the University of Southern Mississippi, where she is an editor for *Mississippi Review*.

Willis Barnstone taught in Greece at the end of the civil war (1949-51), in Buenos Aires during the Dirty War, and during the Cultural Revolution went to China, where he was later a Fulbright Professor of American Literature at Beijing Foreign Studies University (1984-1985). His books include *Modern European Poetry* (Bantam, 1967), *The Other Bible* (HarperCollins, 1984), and a memoir biography, *With Borges on an Ordinary Evening in Buenos Aires* (Illinois, 1993). His literary translation of the *New Testament* is forthcoming from Penguin Putnam. He is Distinguished Professor at Indiana University.

Steven Ford Brown is the translator of *Astonishing World: The Selected Poems Of Ángel González, 1956-1986* (Milkweed Editions, 1992). His work appears widely as an editor and translator.

Cola Franzen lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her translations include Claudio Guillén's *Challenge of Comparative Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1993) and *Poems of Arab Andalusia* (City Lights, 1989). She is vice-president of Language Research, Inc., founded by I. A. Richards, with headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Nancy Abraham Hall teaches at Wellesley College. Raised in Mexico City, she is an editor and translator of contemporary Latin American literature. Her books include *Campo abierto: lecturas sociopolíticas de Hispanoamérica* (with M. J. Treacy) and *A Necklace of Words: Short Fiction by Mexican Women* (with Marjorie Agosín).

Elizabeth Gamble Miller, Ph.D., professor at Southern Methodist University, is a translator of contemporary poetry, fiction, fables, and essays from Spain, Mexico, Central and South America. Miller is on the board of *Translation Review*, the editor of the newsletter of the American Literary Translators Association, a corresponding member of the Academia Salvadoreña de la Lengua, and a member of the Academia Iberoamericana de Poesía of Madrid.

Rebecca Morgan earned her B.A. in Spanish from Valdosta State University and her M.A. in Spanish Literature from Florida State University. She lives in Thomasville, Georgia.

Delia Poey was born in Mexico City, where she spent her early childhood. In 1973 she moved to Miami and graduated from the University of Florida. She is the co-editor of *Iguana Dreams: New Latino Fiction, Little Havana Blues,* and editor and co-translator of *Out of the Mirrored Garden: Short Fiction by Latin American Women.*

Daniel Shapiro is Director of Literature and Managing Editor of *Review: Latin American Literature and Art* at The Américas Society in New York. He is the General Editor of the "Poetry in Indigenous Languages" series, Latin American Literary Review Press.

Virgil Suárez was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1962, and later emigrated with his parents to Madrid, Spain. He arrived in the United States in 1974 and grew up in Los Angeles. He is the author of several books about the Cuban-American experience, *The Cutter, Latin Jazz, Havana Thursdays,* and *Spared Angola: Memories of a Cuban-American Childhood*. He teaches at Florida State University.

Renata Treitel, teacher, poet and translator, was born in Switzerland and educated in Italy, Argentina, and the United States. Her translations include Susana Thénon's *distancias (distances)*, Sun & Moon Press, 1994, and a translation from the Italian of Rosita Copioli's *Splendida Lumina Solis (The Blazing Lights of the Sun)*, Sun and Moon Press, 1996. Her awards for translation include a Witter Bynner Translation Grant and an Oklahoma Poetry Award for the translation of *The Blazing Lights of the Sun*.

Steven F. White co-translated Federico García Lorca's *Poet in New York*. He is the translator of *Cruz e Sousa: The Banished Poet*, the screenplay of a film by Brazilian director Sylvio Back. He also recently co-edited *Ayahuasca Reader: Encounters with the Amazon's Sacred Vine*. He currently teaches at St. Lawrence University.

Latin American Poetry

a selection of personal favorites
by Steven Ford Brown

Argentina
Selected Poems Jorge Luis Borges
Selected Poems Alberto Girri
Vertical Poetry Roberto Juarroz
The Restlessness of the Rosebush Alfonsina Storni

Brazil
Selected Poetry, 1937-1990 João Cabral de Melo Neto
Traveling in the Family Carlos Drummond de Andrade
The Alphabet in the Park Adelia Prado

Chile
Selected Poetry Vicente Huidobro
Desolation Gabriela Mistral
Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair Pablo Neruda
Residence on Earth Pablo Neruda
From the Lightning Bolt Gonzalo Rojas
From the Country of Nevermore Jorge Tellier

Colombia
Poems Jose Asunción
All Poets Are Saints and Will Go to Heaven Juan Cobo Borda
Poems Guillermo Valencia

Costa Rica
Invisible Geography of America Laureano Alban

Cuba
Man-Making Words: Selected Poems Nicolás Guillén
A Fountain, a House of Stone Heberto Padilla

Dominican Republic
Countersong to Walt Whitman Pedro Mir

Ecuador
Indian Poems Jorge Carrera Andrade
Place of Origin Jorge Carrera Andrade

El Salvador
The Evidence Roque Dalton

Mexico
Collected Poems Octavio Paz
The Labyrinth of Solitude Octavio Paz
Sea Gulls Alfonso Reyes
Tarumba Jaime Sabines

Nicaragua
Azure Rubén Darío
Psalms Ernesto Cardenal
Nicaragua Poems, 1930-1934 Pablo Antonio Cuadra

Peru
American Soul Jose Santos Chocano
The Book of God and the Hungarians Antonio Cisneros
The Black Heralds César Vallejo
Trilce César Vallejo
Human Poems César Vallejo

Puerto Rico
Song of the Simple Truth Julia de Burgos

Uruguay
The Hour Juana de Ibarbourou

Anthologies in English

Melodious Women: A Poetic Celebration of Extradorinary Women
Marjorie Agosín 1997

Go: Central American Women's Poetry
Zoë Anglesey 1987

Towards an Image of Latin American Poetry
Octavio Armand 1982

An Anthology of Twentieth Century Brazilian Poetry
Elizabeth Bishop 1972

Woman Who Has Sprouted Wings
Mary Crow 1987

Latin American Poetry
Dudley Fitts 1942

Mouth To Mouth: Poems by Twelve Contemporary Mexican Women
Forrest Gander 1993

Thirteen Latin American Poets
H. R. Hays 1943

Latin American Revolutionary Poetry
Robert Márquez 1974

Latin American Poetry in the Twentieth Century
Stephen Tapscott 1996

Poets of Nicaragua, 1918-1979
Steven F. White 1982

Three Incidents in the Early Life of El Perro

George Rabasa

Sleep is impossible in this dark house. Its corners echo with unhappy memories and bitter words. The blistered walls of its damp rooms breathe loss and regret. The Boyhood Home of Presidente Refugio Aguilar had, until recently, fallen into disrepair. Yet, some anonymous friend in the newly reestablished Ministry of Culture has seen fit to appoint me curator of this old house, now a museum, or in the eyes of some, a shrine. The accompanying stipend is a boon for a retired professor, surviving at age seventy-five on the most meager of pensions.

The rooms where I spend my days, though not my nights, are as familiar to me as my own. Refugio "El Perro" Aguilar was a childhood friend of mine. We were neighbors here in San Dimas. Our mothers became close when they realized their sons had been born within days of each other. They would take us to the park for the mild morning sun. Refugio and I were pushed toward each other as if to encourage a hug or a kiss. He grasped my nose as if he were trying to pull it off, and I cried out in pain and terror. He was my first friend. I was his first victim.

Or so the story goes.

Growing up, Refugio and I went in separate directions. I enrolled in our provincial university. He went to the military college and then to the national law school. He soon entered government service. He was promoted to head the Internal Security Ministry. He was elected president. I taught world literature. We shared a small joke: He chased communists while I kept them between book covers.

Through the years we met sporadically for lunch or coffee, whenever, in the course of his frequent political tours, he made a brief stop in San Dimas. The call would come unexpectedly. I'd say, "*Hola, Perro, qué gusto*, how good to hear from you." I was one of the few who could call him Perro to his face.

The Aguilar home is typical of the houses of San Dimas, a high wall and massive front door protect the inside from the streets, noisy and dusty during drought, noisy and muddy during the torrential rains in summer. The house is on Calle La Fuente; the black number 12 is the only identification that this is the family home of our late president. At one time, a bronze plaque identified the house, but young delinquents

gouged the door or painted the walls with various epithets as fast as I could paint them over. I had to finance these repairs out of my pocket because the Ministry of Culture did not assign a budget for the upkeep of the Boyhood Home. The situation improved with the removal of the sign.

Days can go by without a single visitor. And still, I must keep to my post from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Inhibited from taking even the briefest of catnaps, so desirable for a man my age, I pace about the house. Each room opens out into the central courtyard where a fountain burbles delicately to create the illusion of coolness in the hot summer afternoons, its murmur masking the rumble of traffic just outside the massive stucco walls.

When someone rings the bell hoping for a tour, I question them thoroughly. I hope to discourage the curiosity seeker, the morbid voyeur, the potential defacer and the ideological hooligan. Occasionally I'll claim that I'm closing early, pleading an overload of work, prior commitments, or the ever-handy frail health.

The few that I admit are in for a revealing experience. I know this house intimately. Refugio and I played in its rooms and patios, begged treats from its kitchen, wrestled with our schoolwork over the massive table in the dining room. Some ten years ago Presidente Aguilar took it back from its latest owners under the prerogative of eminent domain. It remained locked up until after his death when it was established as a museum by the Ministry of Culture. It has been up to me to refurbish its rooms with the objects that would make it once again come alive as the earliest home of our president. Every detail is important. Nothing has been arbitrarily placed because a corner needed to be filled, because a plant might be decorative here, or some nondescript painting cover a crack in that wall over there. The recreation of history is a highly considered act.

It's part of the magic of objects that over the years they become infused with their owner's personality and speak with a powerful rhetoric of their own. This is the appeal of the Boyhood Home. Its jumble of ostensibly innocent objects: the lamps and chairs and carved end tables, the leather-bound books and dark oil paintings of angels and heroes and sunsets at sea, the pots and pans and spoons hanging from hooks in the kitchen, the toilet accessories in the bathroom, ivory-handled brushes and combs, tortoise-shell mirrors, fine silk hand cloths. The brass fixtures and the blue-tiled walls, the carved bedposts and the scrolled headboard, the silk slippers, the lace nightgown—this is the stuff of life; it contains the seeds of memory.

Photographs, now yellowed and faded behind their glass frames, catch the moment with no knowledge of their eventual importance. Dozens of such pictures hang from the walls of this house. This photo of Refugio's sixth birthday shows him at the head of a table surrounded by other children. I have picked myself out, in the middle of the table, looking directly at Refugio, with a smirk on my face, as if he and I were already in cahoots over some planned mischief. The names of the other kids are mostly forgotten.

Unobserved, I'm free to treat the house as my own. For the occasional resting of my legs, a necessity for a man my age, I like the large leather chair that had been favored by Refugio's father, Señor Augusto Aguilar, after returning from the thriving general store he kept open from eight in the morning until ten at night. I keep this room inaccessible behind a velvet rope supported by two brass stanchions. In this formal parlor, Refugio's mother greeted her guests, served little glasses of crème de menthe, and passed around trays of petits fours. Refugio's family had some sense of how the truly well-off would conduct a social occasion. Even now the room sparkles with the strategically placed crystal vase, the silver candlesticks, the luminescence of purple velvet upholstery on the love seat, and the crocheted antimacassars on the sofa's arms. At night, the room glows under a golden light from a table lamp with a yellow glass shade like a large upturned goblet over the bulb. It is one of the small satisfactions as curator of the Boyhood Home that I can simply unfasten one end of the rope and enter forbidden space.

When memories come with particular clarity, I make notes. I record what I remember and speculate about what might have happened after Refugio and I drifted apart. Memory is a stubborn thing, and once an event has happened, the echo of the moment rumbles on, faintly if you will, but relentlessly into the present. I'm continually adding material to the book I've written. Several books have already been published on the Aguilar period. Mine is a personal chronicle of Refugio Aguilar's half century of public life. Unfortunately, the temper of the times is not right for its publication; there is no demand in our country for a balanced view of the Aguilar era.

Lurid exposés and outright demonizations do get published. Anybody with a horror story is an author: Refugio Aguilar personally marched his enemies into mass graves or into exile or into madness. He was seen pulling triggers, pushing bodies off airplanes, and presenting pink-skinned infants to the wives of his associates. The market for the bizarre and the fanciful seems inexhaustible. Every victim is guaranteed

a best-seller without regard to historical truth, much less literary merit. El Perro must be slain in print over and over, as if we were afraid he might come back from the dead and sink his teeth into us again.

This character assassination by newly formed consensus does not consider that Refugio Aguilar was the architect of our present state of prosperity—a free market economy that has put us on a par with the most progressive developing nations in the world. We have German automobiles, Japanese computers, Korean TVs, Argentinian beefsteaks inside our American refrigerators, French wines to pour into our Belgian glassware, even an occasional Marxist, of the purely theoretical stripe, in our universities.

In Presidente Aguilar we must accommodate contradictory personalities. The Don Refugio in the impeccably tailored Saville Row pinstripes, the white shirt of supple Egyptian cotton graced with a tie in blue and gold Eton stripes, is a different person from the thirty-year-old Captain of Internal Security—dapper in a pleated white guayabera shirt in summer and a suede jacket in winter, dun twill trousers always discretely tucked inside the black boots, the one silver spur glinting on the right heel.

People assume he became known as El Perro because of his repressive measures as head of internal security. Or that he earned the name because of his loyalty to his friends. Also, it is said he held on to power with the tenacity of a dog chewing at a bone. The true story of how Refugio became "The Dog" is one of many things that only I know. Inside this gracious house we refer to its most notable inhabitant as Don Refugio or Señor Presidente or General Aguilar or even Tata Fucho as thousands of children were taught to refer to him in school.

A woman and her husband came to visit the Boyhood Home recently. She had been living abroad for many years, and now, on her first trip home, was eager to reclaim her country's recent history. I should have been somewhat guarded at this explanation. The world is full of people who left at the height of the Aguilar era and are now, after his death, coming back in droves.

The couple was in their forties, the man fairly uninterested and eager to get the tour over with. His wife, on the other hand, moved through the house thoughtfully, pausing in the middle of the silent rooms as if searching out the original smell, the look, the sounds of their original inhabitants. She pored over the objects in Refugio's room: his school books, his student medals, a penknife, a telescope, a book still open to the very page where the reading might have been interrupted. She ran her fingers over everything, as if feeling for dust, or the substance of something that could not be fully apprehended by ordinary sight.

Then she stood at a wall with many photographs, studying each one carefully until she reached the sixth birthday party photo of Refugio and his many guests. Refugio was seated in front of his cake, still unsliced, candles glowing. On his head was a paper crown; the other children wore smaller festive hats.

"That's my mother." The woman put her index finger on the face of a girl seated at the far end of the table, crowded and made small between two large boys. She had her hands on her lap, as if to minimize her presence at the celebration. "She was five," the visitor said to her husband who had been restlessly standing nearby rocking from one foot to the other, breathing an occasional bored sigh.

I took a couple of tentative steps toward the couple and made a show of inspecting the photograph, as if her mother's presence at the birthday party were a matter of historical significance. I had a clear recollection of the event, but none whatsoever of the girl she had pointed out. "How very interesting," I said. "We seldom have visitors who have played a historical role in the Boyhood Home."

"I didn't know you had been so well connected," the man winked at his wife.

"It didn't do me any good, now did it?" she looked at him meaningfully. "In any case," she added with a glance in my direction, "they didn't get off to a good start, Refugio and Mother."

"Interesting," I encouraged her, always eager to pick up some additional nugget for my book.

"My mother was here that one time along with several children from the school. He bit her."

Her husband chuckled. "He bit your mother?"

"Yes, on the finger." The woman nodded her head vigorously, again including me in her recollection. "It happened just before they were seated at the table for the cutting of the cake, and the photograph, I suppose."

"Why would he bite such a sweet girl as your mother must have been?" He put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a firm squeeze.

"She was tearful to be left alone in this strange house and had been given a lollipop for consolation. This brutish little bully," the woman pointed at Refugio, "bit her finger until she had to let go of the candy. There was blood around his mouth."

"Well, in that sense he didn't change much, did he?" the husband laughed out loud, as if he had decided to enjoy himself after all.

"Mother says she remembered screaming at him, and calling him 'perro, perro,' over and over."

"I was there, you know." I pointed at my own face in the picture. "But I remember no such thing. I was at all of Refugio Aguilar's parties, up to his sixteenth birthday. He never bit anyone."

"My mother would not make that up," the woman said defensively. "That is how he got his nickname. Because he would bite people."

"I am not saying your mother was not bitten," I argued politely. "But it was not Refugio Aguilar that bit her."

The woman was angry. Her neck flushed and her hand shook when she reached up to brush a wisp of hair off her forehead. "It's all right, dear," her husband murmured. "It all seems rather trivial now."

"No, Julian," she snapped. "We didn't spend ten years in exile only to come back to the same obfuscations we left behind. El Perro is gone. It's time for the facts, big and small, to come out."

"That is why I am here," I assured her.

"Maybe you do know the truth," she sneered, "but can a friend of his be trusted to tell it?"

"I am a historian, señora."

"So history is being put in the hands of those who stayed and built careers and lived normal lives, while the rest of us were silenced and tortured and made to vanish. Maybe you can tell me where my brother is. His name is Federico Esparza. Or his wife; her name is Mariana Blásquez. Or their neighbors, Fausto and Hermelinda. Or where their baby girl is."

"I can't tell you that," I answered.

"You know nothing?"

"I know how he came to be called El Perro." I shrugged modestly. "In fact, I gave him the name." I knew I had the couple's attention. I yawned and glanced at my watch. "Unfortunately," I said, "it is almost time to close. I'm an old man. This has been a long day."

"It's not so late," the man urged me on.

"In any case," I added curtly, "A story such as the one I could tell you would fall into the category of a special tour."

"A couple of exiles trying to reclaim their history," the man pleaded. "Surely you can sympathize."

"Such private explications are not covered by the basic price of admission," I insisted gently. "Or by my modest salary."

"Ah, but you are a foxy old man," the man laughed, pulling out his wallet and palming it discretely. "Some small gift should make up for the lateness of your closing."

"I cannot accept gifts," I said.

"Julian!" the woman erupted with indignation. "He's just looking for a tip."

"Not a tip, señora," I said sadly. "As a historian, I expect to be paid for my knowledge."

"So what is the price of this knowledge you will share?" the man asked, clearly amused now.

"Well, I will tell you how El Perro got his name," I said. "And you will be of the few that know this."

"He'll just make something up," the woman was pulling again at her husband's sleeve.

"Not at all," I said. "If you don't believe what I tell you, don't pay me."

"And if we do believe you?" the man asked.

"Then, whatever is your good will," I smiled. "*Lo que sea su voluntad.*"

"But if we don't believe, we don't pay," the woman insisted, with more malice than I thought I deserved.

"Good," I said. "Let us go into the parlor where we'll be comfortable." I took the velvet rope off the stanchion and led my guests into the small sitting room. "This area is reserved for special visitors, you know." I indicated the velvet love seat and the plush taffeta chair.

"Well, it does feel good to sit," the woman sighed.

"I would offer you something," I smiled apologetically.

"That's okay," the man said eagerly leaning forward. "Start."

"I have tried, ever since taking over this responsibility, to vanish forever the nickname of El Perro as it refers to Refugio Aguilar. Ironic, you might say, since I gave him the name in the first place. But that was over seventy years ago and the original context has been buried under added layers of meaning. Nowadays, El Perro is synonymous with cruelty and greed and power. It's a name that brings out the boogie man, the faceless child-beater, the rapist, the thief of our souls. It languishes somewhere behind the screen of dimming memory, the dark furry presence of shame.

"The truth about Refugio and his unfortunate nickname is rather innocent. On our walk to school, Refugio and I would pass a house protected by a vicious guard dog. The dog was kept within a walled patio. At the sound and smell of anyone walking by, it would break into frenzied barking and growling. Refugio liked to stand just outside a wide metal door and do very convincing impressions of the dog's bark. We thought it was great fun to drive the dog wild. Refugio's mother would beg him not to tease the dog. But even when Refugio obeyed his mother and was silent, the dog would acknowledge his presence with a fierce aria of grunts and snarls and deep moaning growls.

"We passed the house at the same hour every day; the dog would be waiting for us. Sometimes Refugio would start his yapping and woofing from a block away. The dog would be wild with fury by the time we walked by. I could hear it trying to leap onto the street, only to end up slamming itself against the steel door, nails scratching frantically in a futile climbing motion.

"One bright afternoon we were going home from school, and after exacting from Refugio a promise that he wouldn't taunt the dog, our mothers allowed us to run ahead. Two things were odd as we approached the house: the dog was silent, and the gate that was normally chained shut was slightly parted. The six-inch gap between the edge of the door and the wall exposed us to a hitherto unseen threat. We stopped abruptly, uncertain now whether to backtrack or rush past the potential danger.

"The dog we had so far only imagined, now stood in our path. It was a lean and angular mongrel. A tremor rippled along the spine beneath its wiry-haired coat. Its jaws were parted to reveal two rows of yellow teeth, a pink tongue hanging mockingly to one side. It blinked past me and focused on Refugio with a jaundiced cloudy gaze, eyes filmed over, the corners crusty. Recognizing Refugio as the unseen tormentor, a sound between a moan and a growl rumbled from within its chest.

"I don't know what my friend was thinking at that moment; I was close to tears, in the throes of heartfelt repentance at having enjoyed Refugio's cleverness and the pent-up dog's resulting frustration. I could hear our mothers chattering away, ignorant of the confrontation taking place just ahead. I prayed with desperate fervor that they hurry to our rescue.

"I imagined Refugio would be feeling similarly helpless. Instead, he took slow, deliberate steps toward the dog. It growled mournfully. There was a tentative recoiling and slight backward shuffling as if to find more secure footing from which to leap.

"Sensing a momentary hesitation, Refugio seized the initiative. He let out a series of high pitched barks and growls. He stretched onto his toes and lifted his arms in the air. He jumped about as if possessed by some demon. With every leap the dog was forced to inch backward in order to maintain the original distance. Sensing his advantage, Refugio stepped up the frenzy of his howls and barks, his arms waving, taking those quick small jumps off the balls of his feet. Suddenly, to our amazement, the dog let out a single yelp and scurried back into the house through the narrow opening by the gate.

"By then, our mothers had run to our rescue. They hovered around us, forming a circle with their arms around our shoulders, their wide skirts billowing and concealing us from the threat. I'm sure his mother's steely grip around his wrist kept Refugio from pressing his advantage and pursuing the dog back inside its own house.

"As the four of us walked calmly along the sidewalk, the dog was silent behind its fence. It still barked at anyone else passing by the house. It continued to be still after that day whenever Refugio walked by.

"The next day at school I told everybody about how Refugio made the dangerous dog back down. Refugio was reticent about his own adventure. He could not tell us what he had thought or what he had felt or whether he had been afraid or confident at the moment he exploded in a parody of canine fury. We became a kind of team; he the hero, I the storyteller. With every retelling, I raised that moment to higher epic levels. His experience became mine. I started referring to Refugio as El Perro. Even after everyone tired of hearing about it, his feat lived on. When asked by a new kid in school why he was called El Perro, Refugio would shrug with calculated modesty. It was up to me, then, to tell the story. The nickname stuck."

The light outside was waning, and the parlor settled into a lush gloom, the colors of the Persian carpet drawing into its designs, the plum and maroon shades of the upholstery sinking us all into a kind of inner twilight. I enjoyed the silence for several moments. When we finally spoke, it was in soft, hushed tones as if afraid to wake the spirits that seemed to hover in the Boyhood Home of Refugio Aguilar.

"You make him sound almost heroic," the woman finally said.

"You expected a monster?" I asked. "He was a normal kid. Full of energy, good humor and resourcefulness."

The man shrugged restlessly, this time pulling out his wallet with a bit of flourish. "How much shall we pay you?"

"You sound disappointed," I said.

"No," he shook his head. "It's a good story."

"But it doesn't explain," the woman hesitated for a moment, "how he became a torturer and a killer."

At this point, I could no longer allow these two visitors to speak disrespectfully of Don Refugio Aguilar. I informed them that it was past closing time, and the visit was over. I herded them through the remaining rooms, turning off lights as we went until they were out the door.

Then I went back to the parlor. I had accepted the hundred-peso note the man had slipped me while his wife was not watching. I closed

my eyes, and wondered what I could possibly do with everything I knew, where the lines were drawn from which I could speak or be silent.

Refugio had liked sitting in this chair in his father's absence. I think he enjoyed the position of power the parental throne signified. Tonight, as I sit in the same chair, I get an inkling of what he must have felt.

One day after school, I found my friend in this formal room, sprawled in his father's chair, cracking and munching peanuts from a large paper cone. I couldn't help but be impressed with the regal picture he made, engulfed in the massive chair in his starched white shirt, blue shorts, knee socks, his polished black shoes dangling above the floor. He seemed oblivious to everything around him; his small dark eyes and agile fingers fixed on the process of twisting open the peanut and eagerly consuming the inner fruit, chewing with eager smacking sounds even as he rummaged inside the bag for the next victim of his gouging thumbs.

He had been eating peanuts for a long time; the white outer shells and brown papery skins had fallen in a wide semicircle on the Persian rug. He gave me two handfuls of peanuts and I sat on the sofa. Refugio had made a game of cracking the covering, tapping the two peanuts into his mouth, then placing the shells in the palm of his hand and flicking them with his index, trying to see how far he could get the projectile to fly. I stuffed the shells into my pockets.

We were unusually quiet during the peanut-cracking feast. Our silence must have drawn Refugio's mother to the room. Señora Aguilar was of a sweet and placid disposition, but the mess shocked her into a burst of anger. We (she included both her own disruptive child and his ingenuous partner in crime) had turned her salon into a garbage dump.

The room, of course, would have to be cleaned at once—by us. She was not about to send their maid, Clara, to do our dirty work. The lesson was that we were responsible for our own mess. I tried to catch her eye, so she would notice the shells bulging out of my pockets. But any overt plea of innocence on my part would be perceived by Refugio as an act of disloyalty. In any case, we had both been convicted.

As soon as Señora Aguilar marched out of the room, however, I realized that Refugio had no intention of participating in the cleanup. By this time he had crumpled up the empty paper bag and tossed it into the sea of peanut shells. In a show of solidarity with his share of the problem, I started gathering shells and scooping them into the bag.

"Let it go," he said. "Mother will do it."

"She said she wouldn't."

"She will. She doesn't have anything else to do," he stated, as if

making an obvious point.

I shook my head, not wanting to be part of a confrontation between Refugio and his mother. The quicker the room was cleaned up, the less likely Señora Aguilar's displeasure would follow me to my own home. I was ready to start sweeping up shells, when Refugio addressed me in a terse, unquestionably menacing tone. It was a voice I had not heard before, but which in time would become part of his personality.

"Stop, now," he said. I did. I dropped the shells in my hands and stood up, uncertain as to what I ought to do next.

"Sit," he said simply. "Back there, on the sofa, where you were."

"I think I should go home."

"No," he said. "We will act like men. We will wait for the women to pick up."

"Your mother thinks otherwise," I pointed out.

"So, what do you think she'll do if we just sit?"

We waited in silence for about twenty minutes. Then I heard Refugio's mother pass by the salon, sensed the pause in her steps, felt her shadow as she peered into the darkening room. She glared at Refugio and he held her gaze. I could only look down at my shoes. There was not a word exchanged. A moment later, Mrs. Aguilar came into the room holding a dustpan in one hand and a whisk in the other. The short-handled broom forced her to stoop; it made her seem very vulnerable. She didn't say a word until she was done. It took her only a moment to sweep the peanut shells off the rug. Then, facing her son in the chair, she simply said, "See? Now it's clean. Clean for when your father comes home."

After she left, I could barely see Refugio's face, but there was enough of a glow from a dim lamp that I could make out a look of triumph in his dark eyes. I slid off the sofa and, without saying a word to him, and too embarrassed to say goodbye to anyone, skulked out of the house. I was not sure what had happened between Refugio and his mother, but I knew I had somehow, by my presence, been a part of it. I would eventually understand the curious exchange between them. For the moment, I felt a wave of sorrow on behalf of Mrs. Aguilar. And a shadow of remorse, which I have never been able to shake off.

World Book

For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away?
—Luke 9:25

When my first-grade teacher, Mrs. Bingman,
urged my parents to buy an encyclopedia
to cure my curiosity, none of us knew
what it would cost. The world in twenty books,
the answer to every question I could imagine
and some I couldn't! As soon as it arrived,
I sat down on the carpet next to the bookcase
and pulled a volume out. I didn't know
that nobody likes a know-it-all, that for
six long years I would have no friends. Each entry
led to another—I couldn't stop—as the
discarded volumes rose in stacks around me:
my apple of knowledge, my fortress of solitude.

Susan McLean

The Prodigal Daughter

The prodigal daughter didn't
get a legacy when she left.
She just left.

She didn't spend her money
on prostitutes, or become one,
or tend pigs, or become one.

And she didn't return to throw
herself on her father's mercy
and live as his dependent,

as he feared or hoped she would.
When she met him years later,
he told her, "I do not forgive you.

And she said, "I do not forgive you, either.
You are who you are, I am
who I am, and the past is past—

that isn't going to change.
If I'm happy now—and I am—
then whatever you did or didn't do

to me did me no lasting harm
and may have done some good,
whether you intended it or not.

I can live with that. Can you?"
And everyone went on living,
even the fatted calf.

Susan McLean

Alaska

"They look *just* like you, Mrs. Townsend,"
the registrar said, that sticky July afternoon
when the world wavered, shimmering
with heat midges and mirages, and my stepmother
enrolled us in the North Salem schools.

I can't remember now where my brother
or her two sons were that summer.
Or why Jenny and I even had to go, our bodies
stiff and wrong in blue seersucker short sets,
the heels of my stepmother's white Capezio sandals
tapping the polished halls like a general's.

What I remember is how cold the room got
when the registrar spoke, and how I stared hard
at the state of Alaska jutting into the Pacific
on the Mercator projection like a monster's open mouth.

And how we waited, soft girls
ready to be ground down by a glacier,
when the woman we'd learned to call "Mommy"
shifted inexorably, and told the world
the truth: Our mother was dead.
We weren't really *her* daughters.
Any resemblance between us was an accident
that occurred when she crept across us,
like a river of ice, her weight
altering the shape of our lives
beyond recognition.

And how she looked at us then—
terrible in her power to dissemble or reveal—
then laid an arm casually over each of our shoulders,
and said, "Yes, we *do* look alike, don't we?
Yes, Mrs. McCracken, these are my girls,"
staking her claim on us like a homesteader
marking out boundaries in a wilderness
she'd kill to control.

And how I wanted so badly to look like anyone I was grateful.

Alison Townsend

Geography Class, 1961

In my worst dreams I am back
in that seventh grade
geography class, guessing again
when Sister Theresa asks me
what Denmark's major exports are,
my knowledge of the world suspect,
though I know that Russia has
the Bomb
because we drill each week,
crouching under our desks
or filing out to the concrete shelter
that fronts the armory;
and because we pray each day, "preparing
our souls for the Second Corning,"
Sister says, as she walks the aisles,
reminding us that this world will end
in fire,
a sudden white flash, not the slow
burn I feel watching Kathy Simpson
clean the blackboard, especially when
she stretches, her plaid skirt rising,
her calves tightening above the brown
ankle socks,
her white blouse sheer enough to show
the straps underneath,
her white arm flashing as she erases
half a continent, the pink
borders of North America gone,
nothing left but a wall of black
and the dust settling,

Robert Claps

Ode to My Purse

The three French handbags came
with lifetime warranties. Clasping
heavy straps, I cinch them saddle-tight
against the world's grasping.
Their dark wells incubate details,
stash my days in hidden rooms.
The black postman's case clacks
clock-neat on thigh, ticking tasks.
The red pouch eats torn tickets
and topless lipsticks. Keys to many locks
eel through my caramel creel.
I say, Open Purse, swallow phone,
pen, glasses, cash. Bring home to me,
my magician's hat. I chant,
Lovely Coach-crafted clutch, catch this.
Yawn, soft maw, to gorge and stow
all my emblems, to stretch and hold
the zoo of me, the proof, spoil and tool.

Rachel Dacus

Pneumonia

When something so vital as
Breathing
Hurts,
You're down to basics.
What sweet relief
To think only of breathing
Not work
Or duties
Or people
Or schedules
Or time
Just your own breath
And how to move
Your body slightly
This way or that—
Slowly—
To make breathing less painful.
The exquisite
Effort involved in
Turning from one side
To the other
The sweet rest needed
When the turn
Is made.
Hours pass.
The world is this room
The feel of the pillows
The feel of the covers
The ancient stillness
Of your whole self.
Not too dear
A price to pay
For oneness.

Donna Lisle Gordon

Kanaima, Late Afternoon

He's alone, driving through sunlight almost temperate, the car rising and falling smoothly over small hills. Music from the radio lightens his countenance. He's in an ordered, postcard-pretty town. Flowers, triumphant, decorate. He's thinking of nothing in particular.

Now the colours of trees and lawns, and flowers again; now the colours of polite gardens, and polite houses; now the colours of moored yachts, and docked ships: all are flawlessly lit, astonishingly exact, seem permanent in this last light.

Now nothing but the openness of sky, the openness of sea: a deep, blue energy. The sea air, windy and voluptuous, buffets the car.

He is in bed. There is not much pain. The drug works well. There is she who watches over him. Her presence is like the moon with water.

The music from the radio continues.

Everything he can see is all right.

The late afternoon light holds; somehow, it still holds.

Keith Jardim

Kanaima Guyanese Amerindian word for Lord of Death

Spring Again

Each spring she'd tell me
crocus, snowdrop, hyacinth,
make me bend to see more clearly
whatever it was
so I would not cover it with mulch
or yank it as a weed,
and I'd nod my head *Yes, Yes, Yes,*
repeating the type of leaf, the color
of the stalk,
and now it's spring again and I'm
hovering
with a shovel full of twice-ground
mulch,
a beginning flower or weed by my foot,
green sprouts widening out
as those other, fleshy ones did those
last few months
in the moist darkness of her brain,
taking root to sprout and, in turn, sprout
again,
clinging to any niche, any memory, any name
till who she was
was gone, leaving me standing here
in steel-toed boots, staring
at what I think is a flowering plant
I've mistakenly weeded out,
the *What-do-you-call-it* with broad, fuzzy leaves
that, come June,
will be loaded with those tiny red hearts.

Len Roberts

The Kodiak Wants to Know, When Did Love Become a Joke?

Was he hibernating? Is his desire too big for his body,
his body already bigger than every other bear?

If he was music, he'd be a grand piano, a cathedral organ.
For sure, you'd never fit him up the stairs. You'd have to

hoist him through a window, shouting instructions
from the street: "Okay, steady now. *Whoah,*

let's set him down first and take out his heart;
it's too heavy." See what I mean? He's ruining the mood.

Where's the sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll? the splashy tabloid news?
the stunning secrets about his life? Face it, happiness is boring.

The kodiak mails postcards. They come back marked, "Return to Sender."
He buys a CB. White noise.

Finally, he resorts to Morse code. You know, simple things like,
"Anybody out there?"... "Anyone know what I'm supposed to do?"

Rob Carney

The Secret Life

The women were always dancers
for the Bolshoi. Lean and lithe,
with enormous eyes, flaring tempers
and diamond tiaras in the evening hours,
such women were hard everywhere
their lovers were soft. There was
no cooking, no cleaning.
There were not even afternoons.

The men were always vast
with power, shielded by wealth
and moustaches, given to beef,
to raw spirits. Such men snored
even when they were awake.
There was always snow, wind
whistling through trees, and fog
on every window in the room.

Once in a while shots rang out.
Once in a while the wife showed up,
sobbing against a lintel or great
with rage in the dark backstage.
Once in a while there was a brother
to worry about, consumptive, fierce-eyed,
needing rest on a mountaintop.

Things never ended well. Trains shrouded
in steam, a crisis on the front, sudden
blood. Nothing but the sound of breath
coming and going in the stillness,
the darkness of a new moon, one last
flickering glance at the slowly ebbing tide
as music rose and the plush curtains closed.

Floyd Skloot

The League of Minor Characters

The main character sits on his childhood bed
naming everything that's gone—ex-job, ex-wife,
ex-best friend—and finally apprehends

the breakdown we've felt coming since chapter five.
When his doctor calls, most of us decide
to remain minor characters

like the quixotic neighbor growing
bonsai sequoias, or the waitress with thick
glasses and a passion for chess,

because the main character, in the thrall
of a relentless plot, can't help hurtling toward
the crumbling cliff edge. And who needs that?

Some inherit genes from generations
of minor players, some must learn to guard
those sunny Sundays with the paper

full of heroes in distant gunfire. And some of us
who've gotten smug over the years turn another page,
turn on the football game, until one day

the doorbell rings. We close our books,
adjust our eyes, and the protagonist
sweeps in, insisting himself into our lives

with his entourage of lust and language,
sorrow, brio. Hero, anti-hero, it hardly matters
with the lights this bright. The music crests

and it's time to speak.

Kathleen Flenniken

The Quest for Power Pathetic Fallacy

These would be the last
power lines
I would sit on.
Yet these pigeons
prefer just
this section that hums
and buzzes
with poorly contained current. They all face

west in a motionless stupor
as though being charged
for a religious mission.

In their difficult daily quest
for food and nesting supplies
they return to these wires
and say among themselves, "Well,
at least we have this,"
the proximity to power
of any form
all they wish, all they require.

Michael C. Smith

Murray Drift

How they drift, those tanned boys
with their feet in the water,
leggy gargoyles of the ludic houseboat.
As it purrs they bluely stare,
the green Murray a purling future,
cool, snaking, ancestral, always
bringing something round the bend,
if only tourists rocking
a pink motor boat called *Lipstick.*
Beyond the snags, the rip,
lies a scalloped beach. Someone
remembers swimming there once,
or was it another curve?
Certainty dissolves
in this floating future.
Intricate eucalypt shadows
inch across sand towards river,
snake across an enigmatic shape—
log, dog or something hallucinatory—
slip into fathomless water, dissolve.

Peter Rose

Intimations of Mortality at King Soopers

I was squeezing avocados
for that perfect give
in the rush hour traffic
of a market economy, cash
drawers slamming for six or fewer
items, the scanner keeping time
to the fingering of coupons,
the grocery store cop
like a flabby centurion
eyeing the highschoolers mulling
over condoms, when the volley
of a bomb-blast shook the floor.

I looked up & saw the wall split
from floor to ceiling—
& all that was flat & stiff became
suddenly fluid, a wave of syzygy—
a great, slow whiplash possessed
the shelving; little cigar boxes
startled like a flock of sparrows,
lighter fluid spilled onto cigarettes
& kitchen matches, fifty-pound bags
of dog food slid like glaciers
off their shelves, followed by sacks
of bird seed pouring a gold tide of millet
across the polished floor.

I stopped squeezing. Checkers stopped
checking, the store manager couldn't
manage a single word—even the musak
stopped & dropped its jaw
in the eternity disasters impose.
Struck dumb, & dumb-looking,
we stood where the electro-
encephalograph skids off paper,
until a checker screamed *Oh my God,*

he's driven through the wall! then
we came to, & ran out at sunset
under the flickering sulfur lamps,
to see the front half of a shiny new
green Honda stabbed into the building,
the loose bricks still hemorrhaging the hood,
but the silver-haired gentleman who emerged
was well enough to turn his cane around
& stoically fish his license plate from the rubble
while the manager stood there shaking his head,
& the grocery cop shouted, *It's all over!*
It's all over!

And when, at last we came back
inside, everyone, even the manager,
was blushing with—*happiness,*
& we began talking to each other
as if we were old friends—a customer
asked the deli man if he was having
a scratch-n-dent sale, I stopped
searching for the perfect avocado
& found that nearly *all* the onions
were perfect. We grinned & laughed,
& began to realize, in spite of ourselves,
that this is what we always wanted, to be
amazed, to see with our own eyes a cinematic
disaster, the opening act of the apocalypse,
something to survive.

And though
no one told the old man
who sat alone waiting for the police,
he alone had *made our day,*
as if it hadn't existed before,
nothing to mark it apart from the others
he made us realize, thank Godalmighty,
we are *alive,* with a story to tell.

Steve Miles

Gods of the Dirt

We wallowed like fine, shiny hogs
in the San Joaquin mud, brown
and lumpy, glops glistening
to cool our hides.

Uncle Del, with the earring
like my grandmother wore,
had opened the canal duct,
forcing the rusted round crank
to flood the sheep field.

He said, "We will be glorious,
fabulous, to envy. Our skin
will glow! Come children
roll with me. Be gods
of the summer dirt!"

How it caked us, drying
as we rose from it, baked
instantly by the radiant sun,
jealous of our freedom and ability
to be filthy; it matted our hair
and weighed down our eyelids,
leaving only clean, pure eyes
to see the beauty in the dust.

a. k. huseby

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