

The Queen of Technicolor

by

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ABSTRACT

In *The Queen of Technicolor*, poems draw from the lives of Mexican-Americans as immigrants and their experience of otherness. Facets of a more complex identity—assimilation, language, and a shared human experience—are woven to suggest the need for recognition. The poems are set in the Southwestern United States borderlands as well as Mexico during present day but with a layer of narrative reaching back to the 1940's and the 1910 Mexican Revolution.

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I

1

Ingredients for Clouds

In my second year of school, we're given jars, a little water.
We seal the lids on top and place them in the sunlight.
Mrs. Hodges tells us that this is how to make clouds.
We know what to expect.
But this might be the closest we've ever been
to touching, to tasting.
We expect clouds like cotton candy—
shapes of ducks, rabbits, and fish,
pacing behind the glass.

But no one has prepared us for the invisible.
We catch the water hiding on the shoulders of the jars.
This is the cloud we're told,
but we know what clouds look like:
white clouds against a blue sky,
and none of that is here.
In the jars, the air is whatever's behind it—
the lunch table, cement wall, our faces.
Shouldn't we say something?

Lion Lights

We may never know what it's like for a predator to enter our gate
and drag away the cow / We may never know / what it is like to be the predator
found in the grass / then dragged into town by the hind paws
hearing *this is my territory / That is yours*

Cows didn't always live by the savanna / neither did the boy
who leads them to grasslands / who says / *A lion for a cow*
What does it matter / after both lie still in the yard / the lions
still coming / The boy builds the compromise

in a modified car battery / linked to lights running off solar
after so many shunned scarecrows / hung
dewy and limp / At night / torch bulbs flash for the lions
glinting off their eyes / glinting off the dull cows' eyes

So the lions move toward zebra foals / The boy
enters in the morning with feed and draws the milk / We want to say
to ourselves the lion is a thief / is a drunk driving their car
into our tree / is a mortician / who steals corneas / But no

The lion / is a lion / was / will be a lion / We don't know
what a lion is outside / the cage / the channel / the big cat rescue farm
How are we / outside the lion / Sometimes we're just
straw stuffed in our old clothes / sometimes we move / the lion moves too

To Sing on the Radio

Bits of plastic wash on shore—bright, chewed,
speckled with sand. I collect what's scattered
clinging to parents, to grandparents.

Underwater and distant, they gleam like starfish
sure to dry into brittle, pale versions of themselves.
I wash them—

Robin Hood Motel Room #8

Camping at Santa Ana Canyon

Dish duty on the merchant ship

Mandatory dance with the neighbor girl

Clearly, there are pieces missing.
I ask, *What was your father like?*
My grandmother replies, *He'd rise
before work to sing on the radio for church.*

I piece them to others of similar color,
others of similar shape. Much more drifts past me,
caught in the waves spreading like green glass doors,
crashing into white.

Self-Portrait

At the store, we hold fruits in our hands deciding how good they are.
Avocados, Saturn peaches, mangoes, pears, persimmons.
Their skins are wrinkled stones, soft hearts.
Their skins are tight sweaters to be peeled, split, seeded.
We know what to expect of fruit. We are good at knowing this.

As children, my sisters and I shared rooms, pets, names on occasion.
I was called “little brown bear,” after a favorite children’s book.
In the book, the bear has brown parents. They wear overalls, live in a tree.
I held out my arm between others on the school bus,
girls both darker and lighter—we were slats of wood from different trees.

My tree was darker. I was asked
why I didn’t speak Spanish, where I was from.
To my sisters, this happens less often,
In pictures I see—their light freckles like aspens, my dark eyebrows.

In self-portraits, I’ve never captured my own likeness
completely. Most eyes play tricks. Mine do.
We think we know the shape of our lips or our hairline.
But turning the portrait to face the mirror,
looking at that portrait through the mirror, I am someone else.

I believe my skin must have an alternate life,
must know what it means to have the light and the dark colors
laid side by side on the palette, that I could have been other versions.
But in the mirror, beside the portrait, it is me too.
My skin has only been where I have been.

How Apology is Inspired

When the knocking comes / county agents are on the porch
telling 'Mexicans' / You should go in two weeks,
here are the tickets / here's your destination

In raids / birth certificates / suitcases / and dinners going cold
were still at home / The lights stayed on for days
with no one returning to switch them off / the lights reappearing at dusk

Who knew and said nothing / and still
say nothing / Who went turning off the houselights
because no one was / home

Imagine the people in the train car / the girl whispering
that the moon is following her
to the imagined town / become real

One woman makes paintings of her dreams
by cutting / and placing tiny dyed straws / side by side on a matt
until there's a bridge / and in the distance / a steeple

On Reaching the Middle of the Ocean

Merchant Marines

They are middle class in high school textbooks,
bringing silk and olives from far reaches.
My grandfather thinks of *The Arabian Nights*
of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*: John Hall,
Maria Montez, the thieves hidden in jars, the merchants
who delivered those jars, by now, riding away on ships
like cowboys.

Catalina Island

One side of the island is reserved for military, the other,
fifth-grade field trips.

1940s: four share a hut sunk in the shadows of early winter.
They listen to murmurs, waves, footsteps of endangered fox
on damp leaves. The Texan fellow asks, "What are you?"
He means, "Why are you brown?"
He says, "Aren't you ashamed of it?"

Sunday Matinee

When Pearl Harbor is bombed, he's watching *Swamp Water*—
gray trees, hanging moss, recorded chirps and buzzes from frogs, insects, birds.
Dana Andrews dirties his face as he chases his hound
into the deep unknown. My grandfather thinks of alligators
below the rim of black water, of fluffy ducks above, then slender deer.
Jungle this close to home is unbelievable. More likely
Anne Baxter, wherever she is, will fall in love
when instead the movie shuts off. A handwritten notice
for all service men to report is projected in her place.

The Cape San Blas

Saint Blaise lends himself to the Florida peninsula,
to vacation rentals absorbing the passing hurricanes
where salt once hardened from evaporated seawater. Now,
my grandfather's ship is likely metal retired
in the sides of other ships.

And the Drinking

In Banes, Cuba, he takes a drive into town.
He could be mistaken for some of the locals, fair, dark,
lost in sugar-cane fields, between shoots, damp earth.
Men shrink below the sugar-cane grasses.
They taste it in juice, some never before knowing
where sugar came from, trying to remember
from where they came
hours later where glasses of beer become home,
ports, anything he wants to be pacified or wild.

Two of Twenty-Four

For years, my grandfather wonders.
He goes to a library in 1988 and checks out
the suicide dive. He reads how twenty-four "frances"
left Formosa. Due to poor navigation,
only two arrived.

For a moment, all those planes
in thought beneath the surface,
descending through the darkening net
of water shadows until colors
go as far as they can.

He might never have known,
might never have been.
He remembers how easy it was to "slip" overboard.
At a union meeting, one fellow said, *if I disappear,*
I want to let you know who is after me.

Home

My grandfather doesn't feel like he looks any different.
The Merchant Marines aren't considered vets
until 1998, the year a granddaughter is born.
Too late for any more school, he says.

He takes a Greyhound from New York to Los Angeles.
The bus pulls the sky in its wake. For two weeks
ground sways. The bus sways. He arrives
at Union Station and takes a cab to 14th and Stanford—
his father's grocery store.

Out front, he watches people carrying paper bags full of bread,
soup cans, and fruit to their cars. My grandfather
lifts his duffle and opens the door.

Ulithi

You enjoyed being nowhere,
how men were equally small against the merchant ships,
small against the Western Pacific.

Here front lines are everywhere, you were told.
You thought of them dissolved like salt,
salt water to rinse a sore throat.

Back and forth, you moved with the cargo.
Though the Navy called you *riffraff*, *draft dodgers*,
you heard of merchant ships sunk by the same enemy.

Today, you picture gray masses anchored beneath sun:
battle wagons, your cargo vessel.
It was beach day.

You'd finished wiping your rag over table rims.
Ulithi was a suffering paradise—the island, the guns.
Ulithi sounded like Ulysses

marred by the water, the fish like confetti.
Below, an oil tanker lay in the shallows,
cracked, twisted—a stunned giant.

From the satellite, Ulithi's lagoon and islands
dotting the rim of a sunk volcano
are invisible.

You might still be drinking
those two warm beers, might still be
eighteen, looking down into clear water.

Beneath the Chestnut Tree

It's hard to believe they leave their father beneath the chestnut tree
tied around the waist like a scarecrow.

At first, I assume, he scatters birds
from madness. He waits for his daughter
to collect the fallen chestnuts before him.
By then even the tree forgets

the scarecrow tied to its trunk,
his body like a tumor of mushrooms.
Soon, the birds pull thread from his clothes for nests.
Leaves fall over his head. Seeds catch in his hair.
By his stillness, he becomes the center of a watch,
his wife, sons, and daughter spinning away.

There, there are weddings, births, funerals, war. Here
soft transitions from heat to rain, day to night.
The tree weaves these truths into the knots of its leaves,
speckling the ground with shadow,
darkening his skin into its own coarse image,
their bark peeling away, toughening against the insects.

Azul for Water

Their homes have melted in the crossfire,
so children take water, as much as they can carry

from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico.
That same week over a thousand children have crossed.

Their coyotes say to turn themselves over to border patrol,
which is how they are found by relatives, given court dates.

For some, detained—untreated colds, curses, cement floors on which to sleep.
For some the desert has taken all but bones.

If found, they're treated with an interview of checked pockets,
they're held at the morgue for questioning.

They *had* found the blue-capped water by a creosote bush—
promised colored caps of full gallons, azul for water, rojo for juice—

sticking up from beneath the desert floor.
But someone had stabbed the plastic.

For miles, the children continue to cover their heads with jackets,
take buses, trailers, rafts across uneven stream of the Río Grande.

Accountability for Blind Sheep

God is suspect when Chilean sheep go blind. *The NY Times* reports it's ozone or pink eye. Soon other reasons not to pray.

From the restaurant patio with my glass of ice water, I see a man walk by—
crumpled clothes, full beard, bucket hat. I see a woman, pant leg tied
over one knee, practice in the heat with her walker.

On my way home, I repeat: blind sheep, homeless man, amputee—
names strung through like beads.

Before the day's end, I consider

the man's parents

the tired yellow buttons at the Natural History Museum

the endings of Perry Mason, how neat

Our Lady of Guadalupe statues.

In the morning, the statue on the side yard bows in prayer
while I'm used to saying no thank you, not interested.

Water Theory

1.

If the moon's surface was composed of waves
the way DaVinci thought,
sun reflecting moon ocean and our dark seas'
slow shadow,

borders might be in temperatures, in currents,
in light—the fish sustaining themselves in the cold rock,
the warped water, our planet at arms-length like a hot pearl.

2.

During red tide, the waves
bring jellyfish clear as plastic bags.
A lifeguard washes stings with a spray bottle of vinegar.

On Cornish beaches, reports say Legos
wash up since 1997 when a shipment was lost.
Occasionally, a sea monster arrives—
a thirteen foot oarfish, a log covered in goose barnacles.

3.

Third graders learn about the universal solvent.
But there are always exceptions—
during the density experiment—in water,
oil and honey divide into colored rings.

In the Great Salt Lake, some tourists in their hats
bob like corks all day, all day in the green water.

4.

Have you seen the video of the zebra
attacked by the lion? The lion clamps on the zebra's neck.
The zebra lowers her further into water.
Out of breath, the lion must let go.

What else might collect in water?
In paintings, Monet's bridge over the lily pond—
a dark curve in reflection. In *Sunrise*, his bay—dashes,
blue and orange on a wash of faded violet.

II

Twenty Ways to Paint

—after Pablo Picasso, paintings and drawings 1890–1955

1. *The Picador*

On the birthdays you added a polka-dot bow tie, an old hat.
You sang Soupy Sales. The party is watching you:
a woman in a white shawl, the man with the flat nose
whose name you may never know. You feel
you've been sitting in the sun too long.

2. *Public Garden*

Your father told his parents that your mother washed clothes
even though it wasn't true. It wasn't true
that she was three years older either. To everyone else, she looked like Jackie Kennedy—
hair cut and flipped,
her face finding its way back in your third daughter.
Now it's all blurred, it's warm colors, like trees in a hot wind before a storm,
like women in aprons going home.

3. *Two Acrobats*

On your first date, she wears a Spanish dress,
a pink belt. You both have a Russian dinner with 7and7s.
It's a big table. You find yourself in the corner with her,
sharing a menu like it's a list of where you should live, how many kids there'll be.
She asks how much you make. She asks about the new suit.
Your fingers feel knotted around your ears, her face made in green makeup.

4. *Life*

came slippery and cold—first snow, first snowball to the groin.
Lying flat on your back, you're traced with chalk. You still carry that cutout.
Consoled, fetal, you wonder what swallowed you.
This woman is your wife, you, her husband
looking back on yourself, thinking time a circle.
You regret those dips into blue.

5. *An Actor*

Your wife catches you playing Hamlet in the bathroom.
You're at the mirror crying. She pulls off your funny clothes,
takes you to bed. Once more, you're pieces
of blue and yellow, neither wanting to touch.

6. *Family of Jugglers*

You remember studying law. You remember cleaning
motel rooms in the summer. That memory, a Polaroid photo.
On Sundays you attend church with your wife, your children.
Work is a circus of criminals and manila folders. You're finding
it easier to believe people can murder. Bar chairs. Pool balls.

7. Harlequin on Horseback

You learned to drive late afternoon
somewhere in Anaheim. Your father stumbled into the passenger seat.
He put it in gear and pointed. You put on his hat and shoes. You drove
through the night, through taillights reddening the rain.

8. Still Life with Lemons

The cantaloupe tastes like candy your wife says,
but you don't taste it when the day has been pounding.
It could have been an illusion, all of it, the whole day—
Peach, beige, flesh, salmon. What color is cantaloupe anyway?

9. Harlequin Learning

In your study, you sleep for a while. You wear your father's
Maritime hat and a little smile. Outside one daughter is on the phone
walking in circles. The parakeets are ringing their bells,
You think about quitting again.

10. *The Chess*

Sometimes you'd rather be hit in the face.
You don't like attending socials. It's an infinity of martini
shaped glasses. You think you see
a river or a horse this afternoon, in the faces
and circles and diamonds. You think you have some kind of control.

11. *Apple*

Bitter and Granny Smith and goading you on with that bright yes green.
You found it on the floor, dusted in shadow. The size of an ego,
You put it in your pocket for later.

12. *A Dream*

Your wife asks you to take her to Macy's.
She wants to pick out a pearl necklace. At night when everyone's in bed
you talk about moving to the country.
You can see the stars there. You don't need
to say anything to anyone there.

13. *Faun, Horse, and Bird*

This time, in the mirror, you've changed. Smudges,
tears, a green shadow. You try to clean off the mirror,
And *it* tries to wipe away you.
You stand up. You climb into the nearest building.
You go shopping in antique stores for things, whatever you've forgotten.

14. *Minotaur with Dead Horse in Front of a Cave Facing a Girl in Veil*

It's the last time you put on this costume. The last time
you take your childhood back in your arms and try to make it move.
You wind it up. You push play. Nothing happens.
You leave the store, blocking your eyes from the brightness.

15. *The Remains of Minotaur in Harlequin Costume*

You begin taking dance lessons and marriage counseling.
To the therapist you say your wife doesn't understand.
You talk about your animal history.
You talk about the pets you've had, your whole life.

16. *Minotaur is Wounded*

After finding the bottle in the bathroom cabinet,
your wife confronts you. You are upset.
You must have horns, must be buried in the ocean
trying to dig your way through to the other side.
She and your daughters pull you out by the tail.

17. *Untitled*

Your portrait of Thomas Moore makes him look ambivalent.
You wonder what to do when one daughter stops
going to church, when another is all over the place,
when the youngest corrects your golf swing.

18. *Cat Eating a Bird*

The pets sometimes show you where they're from,
how they could survive without you. How economical
they are. Daughters ask you to pick up the body halves of gophers,
the feathers clumped on the ground. Only the cat is quite proud.
You carry the corpse in a wrapping of plastic to the trash.
It won't be picked up until Tuesday.

19. *Night Fishing at Antibes*

You're old. Your daughters eat ice cream and watch you.
From their bicycles on the edge, the scene is collage:
fluttering triangles, spiraling lights, you kneeling.
Never having caught a fish, you're returning to the origin,
a man in the garden, your companion taking a drink.

20. *Don Quixote*

You first learned to draw birds as m's in kindergarten.
Now, you lean in to hear the humming,
to see if any are suspended against the white sky.
In its coarse simplicity, you recognize the sun,
that old horse.

III

The Queen of Technicolor

In 1943, Laguna, California, in the South Coast Cinema,
my grandmother is fifteen, entranced by color.
Islanders on-screen paddle her to shore with loads of papaya.

She ignores the popcorn, the saltiness,
the ocean sweeping the sand, spilling from the screen,
swirling around her ankles.

All eyes ahead and my grandmother's too. It's Maria Montez,
this time an exotic princess in plumeria headdress,
yellow, coral, violet bloom all around her and in her.

My grandmother likes how she can hear Montez's Spanish accent
hum under the English words. She's heard this sound before
between her parents, her grandparents at Sunday lunch.

My grandmother's family has changed the spelling of their last name
to match: M^óntes to Montez. Mountains to mountains.
She believes there is part of the giantess in her.

And it's true. It's not just Celia, but *Celia Montez like the movie star*.
Montez, the Queen of Technicolor, is always in love,
always in the moment right before being in love. And everyone is there, loving her back.

With a stern face, my grandmother's mother tells her that on weeknights
the Queen is not serving her husband enchiladas and beans.
She is not telling her children to pray. My grandmother doesn't care.

Montez's sleepy eyes are calling the audience in.
And this is her secret. If you were like her—a princess in the tropics,
a Persian queen, Cobra Woman—you'd be in love, too, all the time or about to be.

At nineteen, my grandmother marries Enrique
her last name disappearing in those starry children
chasing one another through the Anaheim motel she and her husband own.

My grandmother outlives Montez who dies in Paris at thirty-nine,
who becomes only beauty, only film,
a slip of light to the screen like a maiden name.

A Fire to Cook

This afternoon in a Riverside taqueria
Chuy orders us mango juice and tacos.
We squeeze lime over the food,
watch the children brought in by parents,
the kids closer to perfection than we may ever be,
their eyes and loud voices.
In this place, a mound of masa sits by the flat stovetop.

Chuy tells me that where he visits family
there are courtyards with surrounding rooms,
that the kitchen must have a fire to cook,
that when you shower, you pour water over your head
with a dipper from a bucket.
Here, you inhale the bitter and salty stems of tomatoes,
the rising sting of de arbol chiles.
And when you do: you are the courtyard—
its succulents, dahlias, palo verde trees,
nopal cactus and its prickly pears, pink bougainvillea.

This Name

The hum of hundreds of years holds this name
in the thumbbed peel of an orange—my name
traced back to northern Chihuahua.

Once-wealthy ancestors, they're now
a caricature of large heads and long legs.
Even on their horses, their feet dragged on the ground.

After the Revolution, this name has belonged
to fruit-pickers, grocers, motel owners.
Now there's a judge, a professor, less Chihuahua.

We have forgotten how to speak with those dead.
I am told half of this name means *bucket* (*balde*),
the other means *branch* (*rama*): water for grafted trees.

I call you *little name*, because you turn invisible
in new mouths, because Balderrama has been spoken by so many
until a name can't be heard anymore.

Little name, as this woman, I've always been ready
to send you away like a nutshell boat
weighted down by a pebble into dry streambeds.

I'm ready not because I have to.
I'm ready because my new name
waits for me up there in storm clouds.

Learning Spanish as an Adult

cenote [*sə-nō'-tē*] noun (m) :

He's told me about underground lakes in Mexico.
The ground sighs into caves. And you're there.

I kiss his ear, breathe gently into its small darkness.
From the grassy edge we consider the rain.

rueda [*rru-'ə-tha*] noun (f) :

To make pinwheels and paper rosettes, I'm told
to begin with squares and rectangles, pulling

edges into the center. They spin like they have forgotten
this origin of steps. We too forget our feet.

oscuro [*ōs-cu'-roh*] adjective :

And color is the first reason
it seems I must learn Spanish.

Much is left in dark waters after light.
Light warps into water's quivering patterns.

There are different kinds of shade under this red umbrella,
beneath the slender trees.

panza [*pahn'-sah, -thah*] noun (f) :

After four children, my mother's shape
is lonely for the time she was most happy.

She practices locating her core in dance—
hula and flamenco at the Senior Center.

On holiday, my sisters and I fold back into her,
back into the ocean waves of her fingers, her hips, her shore.

sonar [son-ár] verb :

On the phone was the ghost again—
Hello? Hello?

My grandfather retells the time
he ‘blew it’ leaving high school.

arroyo [uh-roi'-oh] noun (m) :

Most rivers I've grown with were shallow—
you could walk across them.

In the gutter we watched our leaf boats
float on carwash suds, disappear in drains.

Finding him at a bar, my great uncle tells my grandfather
who tells my father—*Nobody owes you a good time.*

criatura [cree'-ah too-rah] noun (f) :

In the animal, we look for our likeness.
We think we see two people in the horse:

One steers with the front legs and head,
one, the back and tail, lifts the other to jump.

hablar [ha-vlar] verb :

The parrot chooses not to speak.
Or say so when tired of teaching it.

Keep a room for only that language.
Place the birdcage inside the room.

Whistle and click in its way—
find the parrot is teaching you.

salvaje [*sal-va-heh*] adjective :

In grief, we cannot explain the body,
its tenderness, its heaviness.

Without tears, the animal nurses
an old shoe for weeks.

huerta [*wər-tah*] noun (f) :

I could live in this garden.

With fruit trees, with vegetables,
this is a working land.

Think of soup—as a child pulling leaves, berries, grass,
the child stirring a pail for dinner.

You and I See the Animals

—for Elizabeth, Katherine, and Mary

1.

Lion summertime swallowed us up year after year.
We sisters picked neighbor's apricots, peaches, nectarines.
We swung our legs—acrobats on ponies—from bike pedals to handlebars.

We puffed air into the nylon of our swimsuits
to make breasts like mermaids, the water holding them up.
That was when we started wearing swimsuits.

We were wetting our hair in front of our faces
then rolling the damp sheet of it back
to look like George Washingtons,

the hose twirling in the pool
until the last warm day had already passed,
the water too cold for you, then for me.

2.

We listened to longer books on our parents' bed, illustrated Greek mythology.
How silly all those gods and grown-ups,
chasing the sun, opening boxes, looking back.

Each night, sister, you and I thought we could undo our looms,
It was easy to cut thread with scissors,
as easy as unlacing our fingers from one another.

Odysseus had built that olive tree bed, each bedpost a growing tree trunk.
But Penelope was alone, sleeping on the left or right side of the bed,
then spread out in the middle.

He was off on one of those promises again,
while we were sure the bed had grown enough to lift off the roof.
Inside became outside, so animals wandered in following light.

3.

We thought of lion summertime, speckled deer, antsy rabbits,
baboons, green parrots and crows sidestepping her bed's branches,
invisible to the suitors, for they only saw Penelope.

But for crows, there were no suitors, just olives, which they took
in the mornings like they do on our street, when olives fall purple and fat.
The crows stepping on split olives on bedcovers, made footprints all over.

This is the story you're telling me, later in the attic of our garage.
I can feel the spotted fur of the leopard, the feathered necks of flamingoes.
We are all of those animals at once until

you're bored waiting for love. You fly down the attic's drop ladder,
leaving me in the rafters. You begin to sing, sister.
And then the story is over.

The River: My Mother's Spider Veins

The river arrives from high heels, crossed legs, pregnancy.
Who knows? It's dappling her thigh now in purple,
green reeds, and yellow mushrooms.

Bog turtle, salamander, pink river dolphin
existing here in jars, exist in her along shallows
shaded by overgrown trees, the narrow hulls of boats nesting.

Some say my mother's veins are drowned water
since the ice age, that the original stream was flooded over.
And if that's true, her veins are less a map and more
a pattern of lightning strikes.

Once we were all in the estuary of her.
Once we were axolotl pressing our newfound hands
into the river bottom, pushing off.

Looking for Work

Months looking for work, he tries to reimagine himself
beyond this point or rather this space between points.

Some nights he considers taking his car and driving till dawn, then farther,
a piece of space rubble hurling through time.

He busks, collects enough to live on canned soup and jerky,
visits roadside attractions—hollow cement dinosaurs, The Thing.

Street lamps, motel lights, blinking towers connecting phone lines
form Indra's net reflecting each other, reflecting.

The musician teeters along that string between jeweled cities,
when there's enough for gas.

Like a loosed kite sent off into the air,
the music is mostly free.

He writes love songs about stray cats with the pronoun *she*,
receives most tips from moms' favorite Sinatra covers—

The tables are empty, the dance floors deserted
until, to him, the Blues is a beached whale turned skeleton in sand.

The guitar, on its last D-string, complains during shows
by chewing his fingers raw.

He slaps a beat on his jeans like a countdown, then
hitchhikes back to his hometown, is mistaken for someone else.

Rain Shadow

In dry streambeds, stones fit together like puzzles.
The faces of last year's geology cohort are scattered
imprints in shale in pieces.

Or in the Mojave Desert, faces are not important.
During high noon, you reenter the stars until you're blind
then pulled from sleep and fanned.

Some continue to want to know how choppers can touch
down on the desert floor without a sound
or disturbance when there's always clouds of dust.

The husks of bullets can sometimes be found
from Patton's army maneuvers
preparing for North Africa in 1930.

Call it rain shadow. You draw in the missing pieces
of trilobite on a piece of paper and place
the fossil on top like a weight.

Amargosa Opera House

We missed the flowers because there hadn't been enough rain.
My three sisters, our parents and I stand at the salt formations,
the ancient swamp bed now white as bone, gray lines in a cracked plate.

On the drive home, we stop for a ninety-year-old ballerina
who still dances in her toe shoes. Somehow
she performs the desert.

She dances weekly before her painted audience—
the theater's surrounding mural of spectators
from 16th century Spain—their majesties, dukes,
friars, the whole ensemble watching her.

In forty-seven years, she's seen the wildflowers come twice.
She knows what's enough.

Four Ways to Think about Death

In the cemetery we find names, symbols for different faiths.
We imagine the body at rest, like we're told.
We imagine other traditions like other shoes.

In Mexico City, painted petals fill eye sockets, nose cavities, mouths.
Once a year, purchased marigolds take spirits
by the hand to altars, to graves.

In Rome, martyrs from catacombs display wealth in the afterlife:
motionless—ruby, seed-pearl, and emerald cover the bones
now in church. Now what matters.

In Cairo, the body re-inhabits with a storing of furniture,
cups, clothes. The body as brief vessel.
The self again and again.

You and I have plans. We don't say it in words. But we think
we will decompose into one another—this will be my hand and yours.
Already, we are in the sounds of our names spoken above the grass.

Mamá's Telenovelas Were Real

When Celia breaks it off, he is driving her home.
She recalls it as one of her mother's telenovelas—
“If I can't have you. No one can,” he says
throwing a wild turn on the road, hurling the whole mess into a tree.
He's banged in; she stumbles out bleeding from her elbow, still alive.

Jesús's parents say they met in the hospital,
say his father had been taken there after his motorcycle accident.
Mamá was his nurse, massaging his leg.
To his eyes, the first spring dahlia
in this white wonderland.

The girlfriend leaves Lorenzo after the family party.
She leaves the heart-shaped diamond ring, the dish of pillow mints.
He credits his grandmother, her words of advice:
“Love him. Love him. Love him. Or leave him, now.”

Noontime Hero

On a forest hike, a man and son stop for lunch.
The boy lies back on a rock.
They've planned to go home
soon after tossing scraps.
But the man has forgotten the way.
The clouds peek over trees; the woman,
once his wife, has left with someone else.

In his hand, the father holds a tangerine,
a tuna sandwich that's been stinking up the car.
Let's wait until we see a bird or until
we see the first star, the boy says of a forest
crippled by bark beetles and in need of rain.
The father wants so much.
He wishes he knew more than what's on the news—

more about nature so he might tell his son,
this grows only for a few days in the spring or
this many years ago, this mountain was flat.
He wants to say it before telling the truth
about the mother. Wind ripples the trees
standing beside the fallen trees.

The Day Before the World Ends is Saturday

At the shopping center, people choose colors
they look best in. They stand in line for ice cream.

Today, like every day, your pockets tell a brief tale
about your insurance, birthday, call history.

A couple watches the next million years predicted:
North America dances into the arms of Africa,
Eurasia tilts clockwise—all in twenty seconds.

Animals will scatter into farther trees. The bison,
licking their noses, will watch smoke lift.

Lion as Houseguest

—after photographs by Michael Rougier

Or

in bed with the lion: they sleep, each covered by the red blanket. The lion's tail plumes out from under like the thick cord of a church bell.

Or

in bed with the lion: they are awake, watching each other be still. They compare hair and nails against the rosebud print of the sheets.

Or

in bed with the lion: they are pretending to sleep—one hiding from her mother, one from his nature, which has never left. They lie quiet, as if dead.

Or

in bed with the lion: one is awake, watching the other sleep, considering how the live-in trainer asks the mother, daughter, and lion for their inside voices.

Or

in bed with the lion: they are waiting for the photographer, waiting for the pool where she can pull the lion's paws through her wet hair like a heavy brush.

Or

in bed with the lion, apparently named Neil: they like to believe in a world that would allow such things.

Notes on Instinct

1.

At the state fair, visitors pay a dollar to see a twelve-foot alligator in a trailer exhibit.
Behind the curtain, her massive webbed feet paddle her nowhere.
The alligator blinks. She is bored by this job.
She listens intently for a male of her kind to bellow, to head-smack this tiny pool.

2.

When Madeline says poopoo to the tiger at the zoo, the tiger behind bars stares back
at the swatches of yellow dress, this orphan's red hair. The hunt has been had, he says.
We may fight, we may bow, but I am just a ghost of tigers before me and those that will
come.
At night, he imagines mangrove swamps and plodding after slow deer in his old age.

3.

Mules and hinnies still think they're sexy. As a hybrid animal,
few to none will successfully reproduce. But who of us is not curious?
While thunder spooks the horse, the mule flicks its longer ears,
chews the grasses brushing its nose.

4.

Though the river has been dammed, the salmon still push upstream.
They come to slots in the wall to be butchered.
In the educational video, my family sees the fish slide through to air,
the fish still flapping—females scooped of their eggs, males squeezed
to release sperm in plastic buckets where the next generations begin.

5.

When cows listen to "Clair de Lune" are they hearing what we hear?
They wag their ears at the trill, walk up to the wire gate,
stare in the direction of the invisible piano, quiet.

IV

On crushed pottery

I can tell it is the end of the day
by the way the plain rocks turn
blue and burgundy under the shadow
and glimmer released by the last leap of light.
The adobe house is nearly red.
Its window shades act as patches,
closing residents into private rooms.
Plenty is in the moment right before
disappearing, before changing, as if clay
shards of pottery turning to dust
ready to be made again.

On Being Awake

Even now, bodies are still found in the desert.

I try to listen.

On Sundays, some have brief talks with God.
But there are days when prayer is a dead man's float.
How long can you hold your breath?

Or am I *still* enough to return to dry grass in a landscape painting?

Conviction is what we need

in planting jugs of water in the desert border
in extending our hand—I heard we've sent something into deep space.

There's no accountability needed for the costumes we wear in our dreams. Or
in those dreams, are you always yourself and unable to breathe underwater?

I wonder why

some write to preserve themselves
and others build churches the size of breadboxes to mark the site
of car crashes so you're sure to slow down.

As a child, I'd follow the cracks in the road like a treasure map.

Sometimes I have the impulse to do it again.
Now, the paths are footprints of someone who has gone away.

Finger Puppet in the Likeness of Frida Kahlo

From the pedestal of your hand, she nods. Three flowers in her hair, red rebozo across her shoulders, Frida as a finger puppet speaks to children about beauty. Do they already know what is different about Frida's appearance? She faces the world through the stare in each wounded portrait—a deer saying, *pain comes in every color*; two Fridas in a wash of storm clouds; a woman rooted in recline. The window of her chest delivers a vine and it's reaching towards you.

Front Row Giants

In the movie house, Rita Hayworth and Glenn Ford are love, love twenty times our size—their big, beautiful faces; their eyes like planets; their appetite to reach *the end*. They are so many places at once—on theater screens in Los Angeles, New York, Miami, why not Paris—it's as if they've lived a thousand times. She never stops flinging her hair back, never stops the strip tease with her black glove until it's true we know they've *done it*. We can see their world, the light spilling out through the curling smoke, landing the lovers before us. We want to follow their parade of guitar solos, gypsy dances, *have-we-met-before looks*. But just as quickly, they're gone—maybe Ford to the Old West and Hayworth to a backstory in Shanghai. But they meet again in Cordoba then Trinidad, every time disappearing behind the Columbia Pictures banner. We love it best when, in so many fragments, they can get on with the good parts of their lives.

Blue Horizons

One horizon is blue on blue, sky on water,
first merchant schooners skimming a tightrope line,
leaning to this side and then to the other.

Holding my breath, my body below the water-line
in the kidney-shaped pool, I look up: atlas cedar,
diving board, ripples from June bugs treading water.

A horizon breathes outside the east window,
until curtains and foil are needed to blot it out.
My hand on curtain on foil on glass, I feel the elephant.

My Rita Hayworth

Before so many photographs,
does sixteen-year-old Rita
expect beauty to be pinups?
Does it matter
when the *new you* is reprinted
12,000 times?
Rita first poses in white,
a white two-piece by the pool.
Black to Auburn to Strawberry Blond
to Red to Platinum. Her widow's peak
removed, her hairline
seared by electric currents.
What's familiar?
What's comfortable?
Rita as Covergirl. Rita as Salome. Rita as Gilda
glimpsed on the atomic bomb
for first testing somewhere
in the western Pacific.

The papers say she is its "christening."
They mean "sex-bomb"
perfect for the mystery
of what will happen.
But she is just a woman,
Margarita Carmen Casino
mistaken by some for a stranger.
They drop her on the bomb
over white sand atolls.
Rita falls in and out of love,
falls in and out of marriage,
until there are stars
around her head
until her dementia takes on
personas of drunkenness.
What does she tell her granddaughter
about love? Beauty?
The voices from her every photo
fill in the blanks
with wild song.

The Other Side of Giving

In the town of still shadows, hand stitched life-size dolls
stand where husbands and sons used to be.

The dolls wear their old clothes, their belts, their socks
but the boots are still walking since wife and daughter put them on
to muck out the chicken coop, to push the barrow of dry earth,
the women wishing for rain, for water.

In the women's dreams, the dolls promise money
is on its way. There will be enough soon, enough.

The women can't say this. Their eyes smudge, as bits of their bodies
fall loose into the wind. They can't say this as they kneel
before the land in which seeds blow away.

The Dead Dream Us

Ghosts, they pass
between homes
between cuts of earth
between hills and rivers—impressions
from the heavy gait of a giantess.

Those-who-look-for-her climb into her pressed palms.
They inhale roses,
listen to stars chime as church bells.
From there, all the world could fit
in this hand.

Resonant Frequency

On the afternoon the bulldozers came
for the trees in the field past her backyard,
my sister said she'd take in the two horses,
who on all other days would be sleeping in the shade,
standing in the buzzing grasses, and later taking
apples from my sister's hands
once she climbed through
the loose slats of the fence.

In her house, the horses are civil,
stepping on newspaper, admiring her clay angels,
but neither she nor the horses can bear the groans
of the trees, trees not even speaking,
as cottonwood and sweetgum take their falls
like swans land on water—waving branches,
a splash of dust and leaves, their wings now
folded and still.

It's this groaning, she tells me, from the trees
but from other things too. I hear it
from news on washed up refugees, children
at the border, the unspeakable crouched
so flat, at times we forget what madness is.
Each of these makes a sound
which knocks into others
until it is always in my ears,
shaking the windowpanes.

The shy horses catch a hint of sawdust
on the air, and leaning against each
other, they fall through dreams—
dappled shade, gala apples, my sister's hands
swinging back and forth as she walks toward them.

You Learn to Swing by Yourself

And this time is not so bad. You're not the one
about to shatter, not trying to save the world. Except
this time, there is no swing set in the sandbox
that stretches for miles with only patches
of creosote and saguaro to shade you.
Instead, you've swung from the arms of your abuela
into the hills, into the desert, into the river, into the town
of house lights, none of which are yours. How far must you go
to swing back.

You Do as You're Told

You've memorized an address.
It's written too on a scrap of paper in your pocket
alongside your yellow yoyo and the red string
between its two hemispheres.
In the other pocket, the prayer card
except at night, it's too dark to read. Still,
you look up, praying from a list of your own:
Mamá, Papá, tus abuelos, el perro,
your brother somewhere in the stars
and this may be the one you're following,
because sometimes there are rides
to the next town and the next.
Each day the yoyo unfurls
and springs back to the nest. It sings
faintly in a language of tides.
It flings to the edge of prayer.
It twirls back to your palm in answer. You pray
for your feet to stop aching,
for you to disappear,
a leaf in deep water far downstream.

Turtle Nesting Season

Your father might be trimming fruit by the fence,
looking up toward the mountain. He will wait
by himself in the city that's become the empty shell
of a pomegranate. You and your friends used to hear
shooting, used to know people getting by

with holes through their bodies.
There's no protection behind the fence
your father built. So you've come to wait
on the other side, to think of your father
and the house, its lights turned out. Here

you can walk to school without threats. Here
you learn English but play fútbol.
Goodbye lasts only until tomorrow.
But nesting season is back home—
back behind fence and river and buses
in which you waited for hours,

remembering the newborn turtles on the beach—
their shells dark petals that blow into tides.
People lead the turtles by waving away gulls.
When they flap their arms they are dancing a dance.

Some Horses Don't Get Broken

Mustangs stand in corrals across from the prison grounds.
Some sleep, some wander to water in the mouths of overturned tires.
I'm told the inmates feed and break the horses. How strange a word
that a horse who stops and goes on command is thought broken.
Their blocks of hay dry in the gated field smelling sweet
while black birds scratch loose straw near the roadside.
The first steps in breaking a horse are gentle:
They're fed by hands, hands then run along their shoulder.
Inmate and horse walk beside one another.
The inmate notices what the horse notices,
the sun at their back, their overlapping shadows.

A Place to Stop

The prison, train tracks, and town spread thinly across stretches of desert.
I briefly stop to refuel, the heat swallowing the car even in shade.
Two wanderers sit against the gas station with a large, wooden cross
laid beside them, a cloth pad taped to the intersect for shoulder carrying.
They converse with each other holding cans of orange soda,
which they raise to the air and lower to tangled beards
then wipe those beards with the long sleeves of their shirts.
It's Monday, belonging to each of us.

NOTES

1. “Lion Lights” was written after the Ted Talk given by Richard Turere on his invention to protect livestock near the Kenyan savanna.
2. “How Apology is Inspired” was written after the Apology Act issued for the forced deportation of two million people of Mexican ancestry in 1930. Many are unaware of this. One source reads: “California's apology was inspired by the work of...Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez...”
3. “On Reaching the Middle of the Ocean,” and “Ulithi,” were written after interviews with my grandfather, Enrique (Hank) Balderrama.
4. “Beneath the Chestnuts Tree” written after Gabriel García Marquez.
5. “Blue for Water” written after reports from CNN, NYT, NPR and Think Progress.
6. “Water Theory” was inspired while visiting Leonardo da Vinci’s Codex temporarily on display at the Phoenix Art Museum. On page eighty-one, da Vinci hypothesizes that the moon has an ocean. The light part is the moon’s ocean reflected. The dark is the earth’s ocean’s shadow. The moon is spotted and uneven because of “wind-driven waves.”

7. “Twenty Ways to Paint,” is a PechaKucha, a form derived from Japanese business presentations in which there are twenty slides, for which the presenter speaks twenty seconds on each. In this case the poem is an ekphrasis on work throughout the career of Pablo Picasso.
8. “Learning Spanish as an Adult”—Having no memory of these words, I have built for them: four walls and a door. Or if it is a tree, then it is a grafted tree sprouting apples, cherries, plums.
9. In “Looking For Work,” Indra’s Net is a metaphor described by the sutra, Avatamsaka, as a vast net that reaches infinitely. Linking the net are an infinite number of jewels, each jewel and each reflection of each jewel reflecting all others.
10. Mojave translates to rain-shadow.
11. “Lion As Houseguest” is an ekphrasis of a photo in a series by Michael Rougier for LIFE Magazine. Taken in 1971, the photos depict Tippi Hedren and her daughter, Melanie Griffith, sharing their mansion with a lion in preparation for the film, *Roar*. The images are now at the Getty.
12. “Resonant Frequency” written after Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Aleph.” It is a natural frequency of vibration decided by the physical parameters of an object. Resonant

frequency is what allows one to swing on a swing set, use a yo-yo, or shatter a wine glass with a precise tone.

13. "Turtle Nesting Season," written with source material from an article by J. Weston Phippen titled, "Young, Illegal, and Alone" in *The Atlantic*.

14. "Some Horse Do Not Get Broken" and "A Place to Stop" written after my involvement volunteer co-teaching a creative writing workshop at the Arizona Department of Corrections State Prison in Florence, Arizona. Corrals across the street from the prison are visible upon entry. Their Wild Horse Program through Arizona Correctional Industries (ACI) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) allows inmates to domesticate mustangs under the guidance of experienced trainers, so the horses can be offered for adoption.