

MEETING MESCALITO AT OAK HILL CEMETERY

Sixteen years old and crooked
with drug, time warped blissfully
as I sat alone on Oak Hill.

The cemetery stones were neither erect
nor stonelike, but looked soft and harmless;
thousands of them rippling the meadows
like overgrown daisies.

I picked apricots from the trees below
where the great peacocks roosted and naggd
loose the feathers from their tails.
I knelt to a lizard with my hands
on the earth, lifted him and held him
in my palm — Mescalito
was a true god.

Coming home that evening
nothing had changed. I covered Mama on the sofa
with a quilt I sewed myself, locked my bedroom
door against the stepfather, and gathered
the feathers I'd found that morning, each
green eye in a heaven of blue, a fistfull
of understanding;

and late that night I tasted
the last of the sweet fruit, sucked the rich pit
and thought nothing of death.

10

BENEATH THE SHADOW OF THE FREEWAY

1

Across the street — the freeway,
blind worm, wrapping the valley up
from Los Altos to Sal Si Puedes.
I watched it from my porch
unwinding. Every day at dusk
as Grandma watered geraniums
the shadow of the freeway lengthened.

2

We were a woman family:
Grandma, our innocent Queen;
Mama, the Swift Knight, Fearless Warrior.
Mama wanted to be Princess instead.
I know that. Even now she dreams of taffeta
and foot-high tiaras.

Myself: I could never decide.
So I turned to books, those staunch, upright men.
I became Scribe: Translator of Foreign Mail,
interpreting letters from the government, notices
of dissolved marriages and Welfare stipulations.
I paid the bills, did light man-work, fixed faucets,
insured everything
against all leaks.

3

Before rain I notice seagulls.
They walk in flocks,
cautious across lawns: splayed toes,
indecisive beaks. Grandma says
seagulls mean storm.

11

In California in the summer,
mockingbirds sing all night.
Grandma says they are singing for their nesting wives.
"They don't leave their families
borrachando."

She likes the ways of birds,
respects how they show themselves
for toast and a whistle.

She believes in myths and birds.
She trusts only what she builds
with her own hands.

4

She built her house,
cocky, disheveled carpentry,
after living twenty-five years
with a man who tried to kill her.

Grandma, from the hills of Santa Barbara,
I would open my eyes to see her stir mush
in the morning, her hair in loose braids,
tucked close around her head
with a yellow scarf.

Mama said, "It's her own fault,
getting screwed by a man for that long.
Sure as shit wasn't hard."
soft she was soft

12

5
in the night I would hear it
glass bottles shattering the street
words cracked into shrill screams
inside my throat a cold fear
as it entered the house in hard
unsteady steps stopping at my door
my name bathrobe slippers
outside a 3 A.M. mist heavy
as a breath full of whiskey
stop it go home come inside
mama if he comes here again
I'll call the police

inside
a gray kitten a touchstone
purring beneath the quilts
Grandma stitched
from his suits
the patchwork singing
of mockingbirds

6

"You're too soft . . . always were.
You'll get nothing but shit.
Baby, don't count on nobody."

13

FOR EDWARD LONG

*There are some who are not of this world.
Take what you need. Covert.
The child is one. They will comfort her soon.*

*E. L. (In a letter to my mother
from the Atascadero State Hospital,
Fall, 1965)*

*Partner, you called me
that first morning my grandmother
found you, drunk, homeless, and you stayed
long enough to give me my voice.*

*You taught me to read all those windsongs
in the verses of Stevenson.
You'd pay me a quarter to sing on your lap
beneath the dust storm of your scruffy chin.
In those still nights your wine breath
sweetened the air for me.*

*You were father, grandfather, the man
who dug ditches for the county
and knew a code so secret
they locked it away.*

*Pardner, Doctor, crazy
mathematician and sometimes
wizard to the child I still am,
I still believe you.
I still gaze at the fall winds
you once taught me to describe.
I still shadow you. I know
wherever you are
you'll be reading poems
and this is how
I'll find you.*

—a mother's wisdom.
Soft. I haven't changed,
maybe grown more silent, cynical
on the outside.

"O Mama, with what's inside of me
I could wash that all away. I could."

"But Mama, if you're good to them
they'll be good to you back."

Back. The freeway is across the street.
It's summer now. Every night I sleep with a gentle man
to the hymn of mockingbirds,
and in time, I plant geraniums.
I tie up my hair into loose braids,
and trust only what I have built
with my own hands.

AN INTERPRETATION OF DINNER
BY THE UNINVITED GUEST

In the evening dusk when earth
is half star, half rock of red light,
when heaven opens to let out her crew
of white, bread-cheeked angels, marching
on to moral wars,
at six, exactly, the family
sits to supper. I watch them
in secret from my second floor apartment.
All hands, I see a Punch and Judy
farce: the right and left take turns.
The window is their stage. They perform
for me, alone. They pass. They set.
Their pats of butter, stewing
the tears from the fleshy buns;
and finally, they settle their places,
unfold their napkins, and begin
the feast.

I am alone and hungry
and I watch this every night
from my voting booth room.
If I turned on the light
they would see me. But I never.
The hands would reattach themselves
and who knows what country
their bodies dwell in.

POEM FOR THE YOUNG WHITE MAN
WHO ASKED ME HOW I, AN INTELLIGENT,
WELL-READ PERSON COULD BELIEVE
IN THE WAR BETWEEN RACES

In my land there are no distinctions.
The barbed wire politics of oppression
have been torn down long ago. The only reminder
of past battles, lost or won, is a slight
rutting in the fertile fields.

In my land
people write poems about love,
full of nothing but contented childlike syllables.
Everyone reads Russian short stories and weeps.
There are no boundaries.
There is no hunger, no
complicated famine or greed.

I am not a revolutionary.
I don't even like political poems.
Do you think I can believe in a war between races?
I can deny it. I can forget about it
when I'm safe,
living on my own continent of harmony
and home, but I am not
there.

I believe in revolution
because everywhere the crosses are burning,
sharp-shooting goose-steppers round every corner,
there are snipers in the schools
(I know you don't believe this.
You think this is nothing
but faddish exaggeration. But they
are not shooting at you.)

I'm marked by the color of my skin.
The bullets are discrete and designed to kill slowly.
They are aiming at my children.
These are facts.
Let me show you my wounds: my stumbling mind, my
"excuse me" tongue, and this
nagging preoccupation
with the feeling of not being good enough.
These bullets bury deeper than logic.
Racism is not intellectual.
I can not reason these scars away.

Outside my door
there is a real enemy
who hates me.

I am a poet
who yearns to dance on rooftops,
to whisper delicate lines about joy
and the blessings of human understanding.
I try. I go to my land, my tower of words and
bolt the door, but the typewriter doesn't fade out
the sounds of blasting and muffled outrage.
My own days bring me slaps on the face.
Every day I am deluged with reminders
that this is not
my land

and this is my land.
I do not believe in the war between races
but in this country
there is war.

BARCO DE REFUGIADOS

Como almidón de maíz
me deslizo, pasando por los ojos de mi abuela,
biblia a su lado. Se quita los lentes.
El pudín se hace espeso.

Mamá me crío sin lenguaje.
Soy huérfano de mi nombre español.
Las palabras son extrañas,
tartamudeando en mi lengua.
Mis ojos ven el espejo, mi reflejo:
piel de bronce, cabello negro.
Siento que soy un cautivo
a bordo de un barco de refugiados.
El barco que nunca atraca.
El barco que nunca atraca.

9

REFUGEE SHIP

Like wet cornstarch, I slide
past my grandmother's eyes. Bible
at her side, she removes her glasses.
The pudding thickens.

Mama raised me without language.
I'm orphaned from my Spanish name.
The words are foreign, stumbling
on my tongue. I see in the mirror
my reflection: bronzed skin, black hair.
I feel I am a captive
aboard the refugee ship.
The ship that will never dock.
El barco que nunca atraca.

VISIONS OF MEXICO WHILE
AT A WRITING SYMPOSIUM
IN PORT TOWNSEND, WASHINGTON

México,

I look for you all day in the streets of Oaxaca,
The children run to me, laughing,
spinning me blind and silly.
They call to me in words of another language.
My brown body searches the streets
for the dye that will color my thoughts.

But México gags,
!Espúta!
on this bland pochaseed.

I didn't ask to be brought up tonta!
My name hangs about me like a loose tooth.
Old women know my secret,
"Es la culpa de los antepasados."
Blame it on the old ones.
They give me a name
that fights me.

México

When I'm that far south, the old words
molt off my skin, the feathers
of all my nervousness.

My own words somersault naturally as my name,
joyous among all those meadows: Michoacán,
Vera Cruz, Tenochtitlán, Oaxaca . . .
Pueblos green on the low hills
where men slap handballs below acres of maíz.
I watch and understand.

My frail body has never packed mud
or gathered in the full weight of the harvest.
Alone with the women in the adobe, I watch men,
their taut faces holding in all their youth.
This far south we are governed by the law
of the next whole meal. We work
and watch seabirds elbow their wings
in migratory ways, those mispronouncing gulls
coming south
to refuge or gameland.

I don't want to pretend I know more
and can speak all the names. I can't.
My sense of this land can only ripple through my veins
like the chant of an epic corrido.
I come from a long line of eloquent illiterates
whose history reveals what words don't say.
Our anger is our way of speaking,
the gesture is an utterance more pure than word.

We are not animals
but our senses are keen and our reflexes,
accurate punctuation.
All the knifings in a single night, low-voiced
scuffings, sirens, gunnings . . .
We hear them
and the poet within us bays.

Washington

I don't belong this far north.
The uncomfortable birds gawk at me.
They hem and haw from their borders in the sky.
I heard them say: México is a stumbling comedy.
A loose-legged Cantinflas woman
acting with Pancho Villa drunkenness.
Last night at the tavern
this was all confirmed
in a painting of a woman: her glowing
silk skin, a halo
extending from her golden coiffure
while around her, dark-skinned men with Jap slant eyes
were drooping in a caricature of machismo.
Below it, at the bar, two Chicanas
hung at their beers. They had painted black
birds that dipped beneath their eyelids.
They were still as foam while the men
fiddled with their asses, absently;
the bubbles of their teased hair snapped
open in the forced wind of the beating fan.

there are songs in my head I could sing you
songs that could drone away
all the Mariachi bands you thought you ever heard
songs that could tell you what I know
or have learned from my people
but for that I need words
simple black nymphs between white sheets of paper
obedient words obligatory words words I steal
in the dark when no one can hear me
as pain sends seabirds south from the cold
I come north
to gather my feathers
for quills

Drawings: For John Who Said to Write about True Love

"The writer. It's a cul-de-sac," you wrote that
winter of our nation's discontent. That first time
I found you, blue marble lying still in the trench, you, staked
in waiting for something, anything but the cell of your small
apartment with the fixtures never scrubbed, the seven great
named cats you gassed in the move. *I couldn't keep them.*
You explained so I understood. And what cat never loved
your shell-like ways, the claw of your steady fingers, *firme*
from the rasping of banjos and steady as it goes
from the nose to the hair to the shaking tip. My favorite
tale was of the owl and the pussycat in love in a china cup
cast at sea, or in a flute more brittle, more lifelike
and riddled with flair, the exquisite polish of its gaudy
glaze now puzzled with heat cracks, now foamed
opalescent as the single espresso dish you bought from
Goodwill. What ever becomes of the heart our common
child fashioned, red silk and golden satin, the gay glitter
fallen from moves, our names with *Love* written in black
felt pen? Who gets what? Who knows what becomes of the
rose you carried home from Spanish Harlem that morning
I sat waiting for the surgeon's suction. What ever becomes
of waiting and wanting, when the princess isn't ready and
the queen has missed the boat, again? Do you still write
those old remarks etched on a page of Kandinsky's ace
letting go? Like: *Lorna meets Oliver North and she*
kicks his butt. The dates are immaterial to me as
salvation or a freer light bending through stallions
in an air gone heavy with underground tunnels. Do you
read me? Is there some library where you'll find me, smashed
on the page of some paper? *Let it go* is my morning mantra
gone blind with the saved backing of a clock, now dark
as an empty womb when I wake, now listening for your tick
or the sound of white walls on a sticky street. Engines out
the window remind me of breathing apparatus at the breaking
of new worlds, the crash and perpetual maligning of the sand
bar where sea lions sawed up logs for a winter cabin. I dream
wood smoke in the morning. I dream the rank and file of used

up chimneys, what that night must have smelled like, her mussed and toweled positioning, my ambivalence of heart through stopped traffic where you picked the right corner to tell me: *They think someone murdered her*. You were there, all right, you were a statue carved from the stone of your birth. You were patient as a sparrow under leaf and as calm as the bay those light evenings when I envisioned you with the fishwife you loved. And yes, I could have done it then, kissed it off, when the scalpel of single star brightened and my world blazed, a dying bulb for the finger of a socket, like our sunsets on the Cape, fallen fish blood in snow, the hearts and diamonds we found and left alone on a New England grave. Why was the summer so long then? Even now a golden season stumps me and I stamp ants on the brilliant iced drifts. I walk a steady mile to that place where you left it, that solid gold band thrown away to a riptide in a gesture the theatrical love—so well. What was my role? Or did I leave it undelivered when they handed me the gun of my triggered smiles and taught me to cock it? Did I play it to the hilt and bleeding, did I plunge in your lap and wake to find you lonely in a ribbon of breathing tissue? Does this impudent muscle die? Does love expire? Do eternal nestings mean much more than a quill gone out or the spit? I spy the bank of frothed fog fuming with airbrushed pussies on a pink horizon. I score my shoes with walking. My skill is losing. It's what we do best, us ducks, us lessons on what not to do.

Thanks for the crack

you wrote

in my O.E.D. that 30th regewal when the summer snapped and hissed suddenly like a bullet of coal flung from a fire place or a dumb swallow who dove into the pit for pay. Kiss her, and it's good luck. I palm this lucky trade but the soot never sells and I never sailed away on a gulf stream that divides continents from ourselves. But only half of me is cracked, the other is launched on a wild bob, a buoy, steadfast in storm. I may sail to Asia or I might waft aimlessly to Spain where my hemp first dried from the rain. My messages wring from the line, unanswered, pressed sheets from an old wash or the impression of a holy thing. But don't pull no science on this shroud, the date will only lie. She'll tell you it's sacred, even sell you a piece of the fray. She appears on the cracked ravines of this

country like a ghost on the windshield of an oncoming train. She refuses to die, but just look at her nation without a spare penny to change. My wear is a glass made clean through misuse, the mishandling of my age as revealing as my erased face, Indian head of my stick birth, my battle buried under an island of snow I've yet to get to. What could I do with this neighborhood of avenues scattered with empty shells of mailboxes, their feet caked with cement like pulled up pilings? Evidently, they haven't a word

for regret

full heart.

Someday, I said, I can write us both from this mess. But the key stalls out from under me when I spell your name. I have to fake the O or go over it again in the dark, a tracing of differences spilled out on a sheet. If I could stick this back together, would it stay? It's no rope, I know, and no good for holding clear liquid. I gather a froth on my gums, and grin the way an old woman grimaces in a morning mirror. I was never a clear thing, never felt the way a daughter feels, never lost out like you, never drove. My moon waits at the edge of an eagle's aerie, almost extinct and the eggs are fragile from poisoned ignitions. I'm never coming out from my cup of tea, never working loose the grease in my hair, the monkey grease from my dancing elbows that jab at your shoulder. But I write, and wait for the book to sell, for I know nothing comes of it but the past with its widening teeth, with its meat breath baited at my neck, persistent as the smell of a drunk. Don't tell me. I already know. It's just the rule of the game for the jack of all hearts, and for the queen of baguettes; it's a cul-de-sac for a joker drawing hearts.

Night Stand

'Onions, lettuce, leeks, broccoli,
garlic, cantaloupe, peaches, plums . . . '

The man whose work is hard
slides onto me glistening
as a bass wielding the sheen
I'm mirrored with when I
step out of the bath.

He wears the patch the sun
has x-rayed to his chest.
He's the color of work.

I'm the color of reading.
I hold my sembrador
under the august calabasas
of his arms. As first

light drifts through gauze
I have eyes the half wild
know with: half bitch,
half wolf; here I am

extraterritorial
in the divisions,
extinctual as a missing
lynx. Its a foreign well

I drag my sullen bucket to—
in a western bar on a frontage
road where we recognize the past
and find we have escaped the thing
which in the night would eat us.

We are gouged by the machinery,
we fill the holes with fire.

We pull the pails another sloshing
day up through the cracks in our
overdue finality. He is wearing
hundred dollar shoes, wool slacks,
linen. He's making better money
now filling holes and digging.
A better life for less is lost.

But if the dirt where I was born
still tamped beneath my feet, if
the concrete avalanche of progress
hadn't filled my love and the
rivers of my youth hadn't iced me
into middle age, I might have
stayed. But no
one stays.

His touch is like a man's
despite his age. His Moorish
fur, his Saturn eyes, his sadness
says: although he may not know
beyond the suicide of soul
the poor possess, the threshing race
machines, the names of Goerring,
Himmeler, Buchenwald, Farben . . .
and all that written fables
spell for us—this he knows—
Estra gente no entiendo nada.

And I—am the way I had intended.
I've come to what I wanted.
And here, writing, wearing things
the discarded dead have
bought and sold: we know.

To We Who Were Saved by the Stars

*Education lifts man's sorrows to a higher plane of regard.
A man's whole life can be a metaphor.*

—Robert Frost

Nothing has to be ugly. Luck of the dumb
is a casual thing. It gathers its beauty in plain
regard. Animus, not inspiration, lets us go
among the flocks and crows crowded around
the railroad ties. Interchanges of far away
places, tokens of our deep faux pas, our interface
of neither/nor, when we mutter moist goodbye and ice
among the silent stars, it frosts our hearts on
the skids and corners, piles the dust upon our grids
as grimaces pardon us, our indecision, our monuments
to presidents, dead, or drafted boys who might have
married us, Mexican poor, or worse. Our lives could be
a casual thing, a reed among the charlatan drones,
a rooted blade, a compass that wields a clubfoot
round and round, drawing fairy circles in clumps
of sand. Irrigate a simple sky and stars fill up
the hemispheres. One by one, the procession
of their birth is a surer song than change
jingling in a rich man's pocket. So knit, you
lint-faced mothers, tat your black holes
into paradise. Gag the grin that forms
along the nap. Pull hard, row slow, a white
boat to your destiny. A man's whole life
may be a metaphor—but a woman's lot
is symbol.

Pleiades from the Cables of Genocide

for my grandmother and against the budgets of '89

Tonight I view seven sisters
As I've never seen them before, brilliant
In their dumb beauty, pockmarked
In the vacant lot of no end winter
Blight. Seven sisters, as they were before,
Naked in a shroud of white linen, scented angels
Of the barrio, hanging around for another smoke,
A breath of what comes next, the aborted nest.
I'll drink to that, says my mother within. Her mother
Scattered tales of legendary ways when earth
Was a child and satellites were a thing of the
Heart. Maybe I could tell her this. I saw them
Tonight, seven Hail Marys, unstringing:
viewed Saturn

Through a singular telescope. Oh wonder
Of pillaged swans! oh breathless geometry
Of setting! You are radiant in your black light
Height, humming as you are in my memory.
Nights as inked as these, breathless
From something that comes from nothing.
Cold hearts, warm hands in your scuffed
Up pockets. I know the shoes those ladies wear,
Only one pair, and pointedly out of fashion
And flared-ass breaking at the toes, at the point
Of despair. Those dog gone shoes. No repair
For those hearts and angles, minus of meals, that
Flap through the seasons, best in summer, smelling
Of sneakers and coconuts, armpits steaming
With the load of the lording boys who garnish
Their quarters: the gun on every corner,
A chamber of laughter as the skag
Appears—glossed, sky white and sunset
Blush, an incandescence giving out, giving up
On their tests, on their grades, on their sky
Blue books, on the good of what's right. A star,
A lucky number that fails all, fails math, fails
Street smarts, dumb gym class, fails to jump
Through the broken hoop, and the ring

Of their lives wounds the neck not their
 Arterial finger. Seven sisters, I knew them
 Well. I remember the only constellation
 My grandmother could point out with the punch
 Of a heart. My grandma's amber stone
 Of a face uplifts to the clarity of an eagle's
 Eye—or the vision of an águila
 Whose mate has succumbed, and she uplifts
 Into heaven, into their stolen hemispheres.

It is true.

When she surrenders he will linger by her leaving,
 Bringing bits of food in switchblade talons, mice
 For the Constitution, fresh squirrel for her wings
 The length of a mortal. He will die there, beside
 Her, belonging, nudging the body into the snowed
 Eternal tide of his hunger. Hunters will find them
 Thus, huddled under their blankets of aspen
 Leaves. Extinct. And if she lives who knows what
 Eye can see her paused between ages and forgotten
 Stories of old ways and the new way
 Of ripping apart. They are huddled, ever squaring
 With the division of destiny. You can find them
 In the stars, with a match, a flaring of failure,
 That spark in the heart that goes out with impression,
 That thumb at the swallow's restless beating.
 And you will look up, really to give up, ready
 To sail through your own departure. I know.
 My grandmother told me, countless times, it was all
 She knew to recite to her daughter of daughters,
 Her Persephone of the pen.

The Seven Sisters

Would smoke in the sky in their silly shoes
 And endless waiting around doing nothing,
 Nothing to do but scuff up the Big Bang with salt
 And recite strange stories of epiphanies of light,
 Claim canons, cannons and horses, and the strange
 Men in their boots in patterns of Nazis and Negroes.
 I count them now in the sky on my abacus of spun duck
 Lineage, a poison gas. There, I remind me, is the nation
 Of peace: seven exiles with their deed of trust
 Signed over through gunfire of attorney.

She rides

Now through the Reagan Ranch her mothers owned.
 I know this—we go back to what we have loved
 And lost. She lingers, riding in her pied pinto gauchos,
 In her hat of many colors and her spurs, her silver
 Spurs. She does not kick the horse. She goes
 Wherever it wants. It guides her to places where
 The angry never eat, where birds are spirits
 Of dead returned for another plot or the crumb
 Of knowledge, that haven of the never to get.
 And she is forever looking to the bare innocence
 Of sky, remembering, dead now, hammered as she is
 Into her grave of stolen home. She is singing
 The stories of Calafia ways and means, of the naacre
 Of extinct oysters and the abalone I engrave
 With her leftover files. She knows the words
 To the song now, what her grandmother sang
 Of how they lit to this earth from the fire
 Of fusion, on the touchstones of love tribes. *Mina*,
 She said, *This is where you come from.* The power
 peace

Of worthless sky that unfolds me—now—in its greedy
 Reading: Weeder of Wreckage, Historian of the Native
 Who says: *It happened. That's all. It just happened.*
 And runs on.

The Chumash who inhabited the Santa Barbara coast may have believed that they descended to earth from the Pleiades, also known as The Seven Sisters. The Seven Sisters also refers to the seven big oil companies.