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For the Stadium Vendor

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Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

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FOR THE STADIUM VENDOR is an original collection of fifty poems accompanied by a preface.

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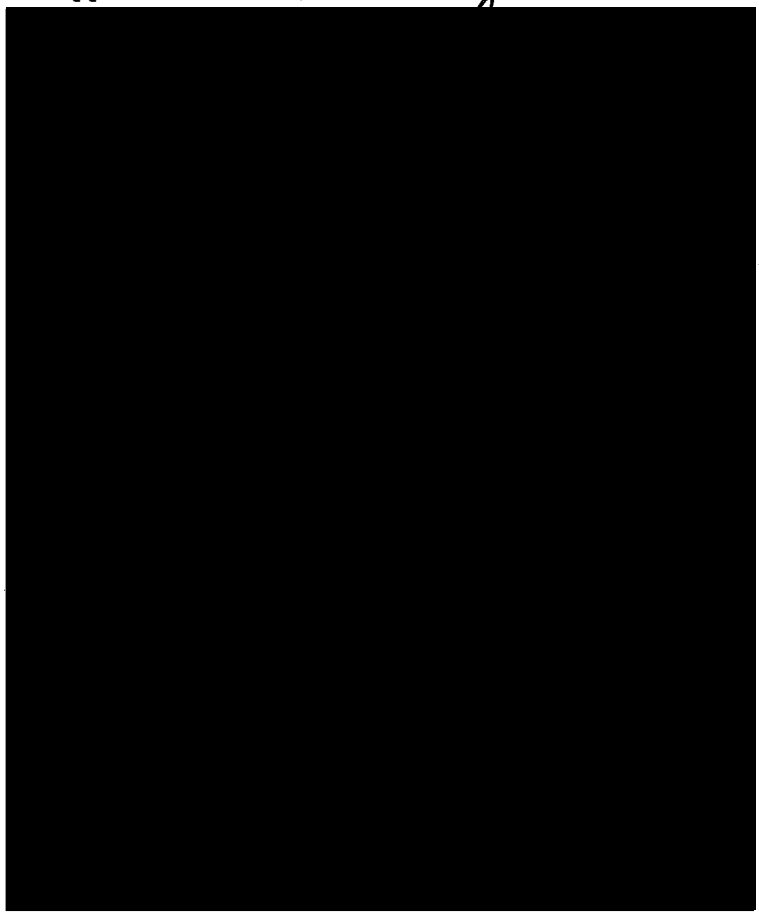

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PREFACE

In the summer of 2008 I studied in Paris. In the habit of waking up early on Sundays when we had time away from class, I walked through the trafficless streets of Ile St.-Louis, underdressed for the cool summer morning. On Pont St.-Louis, one can observe how the Seine bisects Paris –left bank, right bank. I approached Notre Dame and Ile de la Cité thinking about something Ernest Hemingway said in *A Movable Feast*, "Suppose you wanted to be a writer and felt it in every part of your body and it just wouldn't come" (93). Perhaps Hemingway means that a writer knows that he is a writer because of instinct, something he knows since he was born. George Orwell acknowledges a similar understanding in *Why I Write*: "From a very early age, perhaps the age of five or six, I knew that when I grew up I should be a writer" (1). Conversely, I did not realize that I was born to be a poet; in fact, I thought I would go to medical school and become a doctor like my dad. I only came to seriously reading and writing poetry between the ages of 16 and 20. Yet I now feel akin to what Hemingway says about writing and knowing that you are a writer. But Hemingway also talks about experiencing "writer's block," having an uncontrollable urge to write, but being unable to say what he wants to say or what he means. In Hemingway, the act of writing appears to be a physical, emotive and intellectual process that germinates within the mind and body. Being a writer is something that the individual knows and that gives him purpose and identity. When the writer releases the work of the imagination as writing, it is a violent, urgent and uncontrollable activity. Hemingway continues, "Suppose once it had come like an irresistible torrent and then it left you mute and silent" (93). This touches upon

my experiences as a poet. When I write, I experience that letting go of an "irresistible torrent." Physically and mentally exhausting, writing becomes a vocation. But he also articulates one of my greatest fears and insecurities about being a poet in the 21st century: I possess the need and urgency to write, but what happens if it just doesn't come?

In those hours of distress and self-doubt, I recall Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*:

> If you will cling to Nature, to the simple in Nature, to the little things that hardly anyone sees, and that can so unexpectedly become big and beyond measuring; if you have this love of inconsiderable things and seek quite simply, as one who serves, to win the confidence of what seems poor: then everything will become easier, more coherent and somehow more conciliatory for you, not in your intellect, perhaps, which lags marveling behind, but in your inmost consciousness, waking and cognizance. (34)

I return to this passage in my hours of weakness, when I question my ability to say something new and interesting, or anything at all. I find solace in Rilke's advice, and I try to "love" those "inconsiderable things" that appear my daily life: the beetle on the orange tree, the mound of recycling not yet taken out or the shredded ends of shirt sleeves. I see these things and I want to "love" and "cling" to them so that I can become part of a system of interrelated and interdependent parts. In turn, I hope that those objects become part of me as things that I can use in my poems. I rely on observation and close contact with a thing to create images and narrative. I am expecting mutability and transcendence. Yet, recognizing the significance of what Rilke emphasizes as those things that exist on the margins and peripheries, one must confront the nature of

language.

As Pound tells us quite clearly "Language is a means of communication. To charge language with meaning to the utmost possible degree" means "throwing the object (fixed or moving) on to the visual imagination, inducing emotional correlations by the sound and rhythm of speech, inducing both of the effects by stimulating the associations (intellectual or emotional) that have remained in the receiver's consciousness in relation to the actual words or word groups employed" (63). Both Rilke and Pound are imposing a type of dualism between what one experiences physically and sensuously, and what one experiences cognitively. A poet that greatly influences my work and who helps me understand the relationship between the intellect and emotion, Pablo Neruda, explores this dualism and posits that a balance can exist between signifier and signified in terms of individual and the object. "Ode to Things" suggests how one understands relationships with the quotidian, "inconsiderable things." Here, Neruda writes about his love of "scissors," "cups," "thimbles," things made by "Mankind...Built them from wool / and of wood, / of glass and rope" (14-15). Neruda presents objects in direct proximity to other objects and to a speaker who admires, touches and uses all these things. The speaker comes to binaries of use and value; he begins to determine the genesis of the objects, and finally possesses objects, which in turn possess him. The speaker announces that "they were a part / of my being, / they were so alive with me / that they lived half my life/ and will die half my death" (17). The individual and objects appear inseparable, and their meaning resides only in their proximity to each other.

Neruda's simple and clear diction and direct presentation of objects is analogous

to Williams' concept of a poetics that emphasizes the use of accessible language that describes something real, which people will understand.

Williams' "The Great Figure" is a good example of how the poet uses clear and precise language to graspable imagery:

> Among the rain
> and lights
> I saw the figure 5
> in gold
> on a red
> firetruck
> moving
> tense
> unheeded
> to gong clangs
> siren howls
> and wheels rumbling
> through the dark city. (1-13)

Like an impressionist painting with layers upon layers of colors, the poem suggests that the subject, in this case the figure 5 on the firetruck, appears clearly to a viewer only because of contrasts in color, size, texture and movement. The short poem contains a multitude of collisions: the speaker sees and listens to his surroundings in the city, there is the gold "figure 5" painted on the "red / firetruck," there are "rain" and "lights," and

stasis and kinesis. Williams brings objects, and therefore ideas, in contact with each other. Similarly, the poems of *For the Stadium Vendor* bring objects, things, images and people from disparate geographies, Catholicism, science and aesthetics in contact. By presenting such collisions in my poems, I hope to explain how a poet in the 21st century understands the hybridity of language, place and spirituality. My responsibility as a poet of the new millennium is to re-create a sense of urgency about contemporary society, much like the American poets at the turn of the 20th century. This urgency would be grounded in being a useful writer; conscientious of my surroundings – political, environmental, familial and academic – but to do so I have to practice Pound's idea that "Good writers are those that keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear" (32). I hope to achieve this through direct treatment of the image, "clinging" to those unexpected objects that become immeasurable with meaning.

The first poem in the collection *For the Stadium Vendor*, "Strikes," shows various images of Ecuador from the perspective of a child riding in a pickup with his mother through a crowd of protesters and police in riot gear. The volcano stands out in this poem, looming over the riot. The speaker and his mother maneuver through the crowd of protestors and police. Never siding with either group, they travel in relative safety and anonymity while in the pickup. Although the scene supports images of violence in a politically unstable region, the suitcase on the floor of the pickup would suggest that the mother and son are escaping the scene. The themes of violence, migration, political unrest and the instability of the landscape, as the volcano explodes in the context of the riot, suggest the tumultuousness of life in Ecuador. Furthermore, the urgent tone

projected in this poem recurs throughout the manuscript. In Paris, I could not help associating my experiences in Quito and Guatemala City and the poems that I have written about those places with my new experiences in France.

Walking along the winding streets of Montparnasse became an opportunity for me to understand my capacity to live and re-live my own past traveling through Latin America and to explore questions about writing and my purpose as a poet in the new millennium. I walked past bookstores and ice cream parlors, surveyed plaques on landmarks. I imagined Prévert on the corner of Rue Mouffetard pointing to a narrow road "of reinforced concrete" (71). I began to "cling to Nature," as Rilke says, to the objects in my environment, but neither in the Romantic sense nor in the sense Neruda posits in the reverential "Ode to Things." I was not waiting for Nature to inspire me nor was I going to be Nature's conduit, but rather I would experience the act of 'clinging' to something real and physical in the environment I passed through.

Rilke speaks about the thing much like Williams speaks about the thing. They say, "No ideas but in things," and "Cling to the inconsiderable things." The value and use of the thing becomes something charged with meaning because of language. All these dichotomies rely on a strict system of exchange between the poet and audience, which suggests the kind of collaboration that Borges discusses in *This Craft of Verse*. Borges claims that the reader "enhances the book" and by extension gives meaning to the words expressed therein (119).

The poems of *For the Stadium Vendor* present objects and people grounded in empirical observations of nature, landscapes, people and places. Like Rilke, Neruda and

Williams, I hope to transform the image from static representation to something kinetic and accessible. The settings of these poems shift from Latin America to the American south in an attempt to explore the tenuous relationships between individuals and their natural and urban environments. These disparate locations serve as sites where, among other things, humans confront the perils of living on the foothills of active volcanoes or against the backdrop of a suburban strip mall. In these poems, the speakers' desires are borne out into the violent landscape, interlacing human and nonhuman spheres. The first section of the collection, "Mercy," explores the crisis of self-identification that comes with recognizing one's social location in a specific geographical region. The second section, "Vieux Carré," focuses on settings in the South America and the American south and how those locations influence one's understanding of the intersections between the urban, suburban and rural. Many of the speakers' identities are revealed through their intimate connection to place, which depends on the use of accessible language and imagery.

I have always been aware of my geographies because of the intimacy I experience with places: Zacapa, Guatemala, Paris, France and Louisville, Kentucky. As a child, I was soon aware of efficiencies and explications; born in Ecuador and raised in the United States, I think of myself as an immigrant. Perhaps this type of identification lends me to experience intimacy with place, but most of all, I am happy decoding who I am, where I am from and where I am living in order to further understand intersections and collisions between past and present, sight and sound, signifier and signified. My parents met in Ecuador while my dad was in medical school. We moved to southern California from

Quito when I was four. We then moved from California to Kentucky. I have developed stories about my ethnicity since I was very young, and continue to play with those narratives in my poetry. I suppose almost naively, I would make these narratives part of my self-discovery, working toward an understanding of my double-identity as Latino and North American.

My mom, however, has no reservation in calling herself an immigrant, and to this day claims Ecuador as home (although she is a U.S. citizen and has lived in the U.S. for 25 years). I grew up seeing the difficulties she had assimilating to the United States and to American culture. Her still-thick accent appears as evidence of her resistance to linguist assimilation. Spanish remains the primary language spoken at home, and in southern California, one can find Spanish-speakers everywhere, from grocery stores to the DMV. She was not isolated from Spanish, and more so was adamant about raising my brother and me in a bilingual home, encouraging us to read books in English and Spanish and to speak Spanish when spoken to in that language. I would encounter English in almost every other context: school, friends, television and music. Perhaps it was during fourth grade that I began to realize that I was different, bilingual and with a double consciousness about linguistic expression and dual nationality.

I soon began to revel in a love for words, in both languages. The possibilities for self-expression doubled. Many times I know how to express a thought in Spanish more clearly than I can in English, or vice versa. For instance, the word "despistado" does not have a good literal English translation. A poor equivalency would be the word "unaware," as in context, "Richard is unaware that someone is talking to him." But the

Spanish word does not carry negative connotations of aloofness or inconsideration; rather the word suggests a 'clumsy consciousness' about what one perceives or how one experiences something. This example reminds me of many times when I was slow to lace-up church shoes, eat breakfast and brush teeth because I was daydreaming about playing soccer, practicing medicine or going to the park.

Around the fourth grade I began to wake up earlier than the rest of my family in order to be on time for Sunday mass. I was an altar boy at St. Joseph's Catholic church in Upland, California, and most Sunday mornings I served at mass. I knew the church building, from nave to sacristy. I knew the liturgical calendar and the correct color ropes to wear around my white frocks. I knew Fr. John K. didn't use real wine but a cider substitute and that Fr. Larry's breath smelled horrible and to step back from the lectern when he read. I knew the ecclesiastical addresses, responses to general intercessions and how to swing the censor to avoid the deep inhalation of incense. The prayers, the rituals, the physical and emotive acts of contrition and praise, the hymn and sung adorations established in my core the possibility for something mystical and irrational, love for something effervescent and holy. But these are things I could not see, touch, smell or taste. Acts of faith and reverence for God became opaque motifs. I wanted something more concrete, something I could hold in my hands, squeeze or let loose.

The first poems I learned and loved were the prayers in Spanish that my mother taught me to repeat before I went to bed. These prayers spoken in Spanish were more interesting than the prayers in English I memorized as an altar boy. Prayers in both languages emphasized the same ideas and content; for example, issues related the Trinity,

el Padre, el Hijo y el Espiritu Santo. But in Spanish, prayer became musical. Saying the prayers in Spanish, repeating them after my mother, her call and my response, shook me with sonic delight. I would invoke the Holy Spirit, saints and angels as both the subjects and objects of these prayers and I soon realized that I was creating a relationship to an imagined audience. In effect, I was reciting poems every night, such as a prayer to the Virgin Mary in which the speaker asks her for protection; "Madre mia, esperanza mia, yo me pongo bajo tu santo manto, y allí quiero vivir y estar hasta el fin de mi vida. Amen." This ephemeral prayer includes repetition and alliteration, vivid imagery and pathos, all of which I use frequently in my poems. I have come to realize that my interest in prayer at a young age became an interest in poetry because of how much I loved the rhythmic qualities of the Spanish language and wanted to reproduce the wonder it caused me to experience.

As I grew older and began high school, I fell in love with musicians over poets, although the distinction may be nominal. The aural pleasure I gained from hearing and speaking prayers was matched by the experience of listening to Bob Dylan. The first Dylan song I remember really paying attention to was "Blowin' in the Wind" off of the album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan.* Each verse includes three rhetorical questions and an answer that is not absolute, but rather suggests such questions can never be answered properly. What is important is that someone is asking the questions, "how many roads must a man walk down / before you call him a man? / How many seas must the white dove sail / before she sleeps in the sand? / How many times must the cannonballs fly / before they're forever banned?" Speaking about social injustice during the civil rights

and anti-war movements of the 1960's, Dylan was the model that showed me the intersection between art and politics. Moreover, I believed that through this music Dylan made a difference in American culture because of what he said, when he said it and how he said it. In Dylan, I began to see the possibility that music and language were interdependent, and poetry could be spoken in plain and rhythmic language that presented clear and engaging narratives about personal suffering, exploration, travel, social justice and love. My passion for Dylan's music transcends genre.

A musician that has currently influenced the way I understand intersections between art and politics is the rapper Immortal Technique. Set to a sampled sound clip from the movie *Scarface*, Immortal Technique's "Peruvian Cocaine" is a narrative about how cocaine travels from the mountains of Bolivia until it reaches the streets in the U.S. In addition, the song implicates all the players involved in this process, the machetero that harvests the coca leaves, his boss – a lower level lieutenant in a cartel, the cartel leader, the Bolivian police, the CIA, the U.S. politician and lobbyist, and finally the user in Harlem that consumes the cocaine as crack. Immortal Technique's content is analogous to the poetry of witness in Forché's *The Country Between Us*. Examples of U.S. cultural hegemony and imperialism are present in the songs and poems of Immortal Technique and in Forché. *For the Stadium Vendor* also contains poems borne out of experiences in Guatemala's former conflict zones, which became violent and dangerous places to live because of U.S. sponsored acts of cultural and economic hegemony in that country.

I hope my poems accomplish the task of creating and re-creating discussion about

the neo-colonization of Latin America and the continued exploitation of natural resources in the region, such as gold, oil and agricultural products. While countries like Venezuela, Bolivia and Brazil have successfully nationalized many of their industries, foreign corporate ownership of most Latin American countries' natural resources has become the new yoke that Latin American countries and much of the developing world experience from globalized economies and systems of "free-trade" that benefit industrialized nations in North America, Europe and Asia. Poetry appears to be a way to recover what has been lost or stolen from landscapes and people where I have traveled in Latin America. My poems are about place and displacement, but also about placement and hybridity.

The first poems that I wrote as a young high school and college student were attempts to sound like Dylan. I also attempted to write stream of consciousness poems because I had just learned what that term meant and I loved Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* Later, I started reading Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. I wrote nonsensical poems that I thought were surreal and cool. I would listen to Miles Davis' *The Birth of Cool*, smoke cigarettes and write love poems to girls I was too afraid to talk to. It wasn't until I took a creative writing poetry class as a 21-year-old junior in college that I thought about poetry in terms of writing that is public rather than private. I would be writing to an audience. That semester I read Carolyn Forché's anthology, *Against Forgetting*, and encountered Wilfred Owen, Paul Celan, Nicanor Parra, Jacques Prévert and Czeslaw Milosz for the first time. Their poems showed me a new way to think about writing poetry and gave me a new sense of identity as a poet. I began thinking of poetry as something that could transform the way people think about war or

suffering. I was coming to realize that a poem could be an active form of resistance against forces that would otherwise oppress, marginalize or silence an individual.

I remember sitting in the backseat of my dad's car, watching the turn signal of some other car blink repeatedly. At that moment, I began to question the legitimacy of the turn signal and of the intentions of that driver to go on the course where his signal pointed. I wrote a short poem about what I saw. The poem, long misplaced in a shoebox in my parents' basement, began with the same rhetorical device from "Blowin' in the Wind." I wrote, "which way will he turn, right or left? No one knows for sure." This juvenile idea remains with me because I understand how my act of writing was directly influenced by my appreciation for what Dylan says and for his technique. Thinking back on the "blinker poem" I now turn to Williams' poem "Libertad! Igualidad! Fraternidad!" to complete what I wanted to say, but could not:

Well -
all things turn bitter in the end
whether you choose the right or
the left way
and –
dreams are not a bad thing. (*CP* 13-18)

Driving with my dad and thinking about living in uncertainties with regards to direction, purpose or objective filled me with great happiness. And I took great pleasure in writing what I experienced. Williams suggests that "Actually the poet is the happiest of men. He may be stimulated to an extent by unhappiness, though also by happiness. I think that

basic faith in the world, that is, to sum up: happiness—is the basic ground of a poet's makeup. I don't think that unhappiness makes you sing at all...or makes you want to construct something" (77). As much as I have faith in Williams' ideas of the happy poet, much of my writing comes from suffering, either personal or witnessed.

What I discover is that my current composition process relies on the direct treatment of the thing, presenting clear and vivid imagery and paying attention to the structure of a poem. Thematically, many of the poems in *For the Stadium Vendor* show the marginalization of individuals, but they also show the strength of resistance to social, economic and cultural inequities imposed by those that have power over those that do not. The poems also become places where things collide and come in contact with each other, where things can be uncertain, where things can produce and reproduce meaning. Those who suffer and those who resist, Ecuadorian volcanoes and Parisian streets, November in Kentucky and spring in Mississippi, all become evidence of the "irresistible torrent" that has left me wanting to say more.

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I.

MERCY

STRIKES

I stood in the cab of my mother's pickup pressed
between her back and the vinyl bucket seat. My small

arms clung to her shoulders like a harness, face flushed,
a suitcase on the floor. Her hair smelled of perfume

that stung the throat and I picked at the black mole
on her neck with my finger, tugged at the latched

silver chain. Outside the windows, tall volcanoes
with snow. Ash fell from the sky as clouds paced

over Quito. Diesel trucks carried live chickens and hogs.
White feathers flew to our windshield, red hen legs clawed

through the wire cages. I tightened my arms around her
as she shifted gears. Tighter when we crashed through

a stack of burning tires. Tighter as brooms and sticks beat
the side doors. I saluted green and black military police jeeps.

Men with helmets carried guns. Men with masks carried sticks.
People ran in the smoked streets throwing rocks.

AVOCADO ORCHARD FIRE

Water-ripe flowers hiss
and singe upon caloric

contact. The glacial fire
smothers each fruit, peels

back green-purple skin,
smelts pale flesh, does bees

work, explodes seeds
for biennial regeneration.

Ash patina veils the trees
manumitted from their forms.

CITIES OF THE DEAD

Gall wasps sprout
on spongy wood.
Their tiny carcasses
spread open against
pine grain, prismatic.
A thrush swirls thin
limbs. They feed here,
in the bog flax and sedges,
munching on larvae
and succulents. There's so many.

.25 CENT CIGARS

I learned how to roll cigars in Guatemala
from a man who rents a house on an acre of land.
Dole harvests mangos in this valley.
Tobacco stains Manuel's face and fingers.
Scars on his forearms and legs –
tattoos from a land mine.

In his dry barn, away from the churning
wheels of the plow, Manuel hangs
the wet tobacco, weighs dry leaves,
makes even piles. I pinch loose tobacco
with my fingers on the work table

and watch Yolanda hang the laundry
on the drying lines
through the open barn door.
Water drips off pants, shirts
and underwear onto the red-brown earth,
like the sweat from Manuel's brow. He rolls
leaf after leaf after leaf.

ODE TO GRANDPA JONES

Snips cuticles
of his wide thumb nails
with teeth. Picks banjo
strings in quick copper
fits like leaves lift up
in wind, like trout fins
silver water.

HEMISPHERIC DIVIDE

He returns home to *La Mitad del Mundo*,
where monuments mark Latitude zero's
provenance. He flashes through shops
and pokes each llama wool sweater

with straightened index fingers. The fabric sinks,
a garbled response to equatorial pressure. He can't resist
the sheared masses, spindled and dyed. He places woven
finger puppets on each digit to cease the craving.

CHURCH SHOES

Each step peels the flesh.
Pinched heels bleed
through black wool. I walk
slowly, my toes pointed down.

PICKING UP

We eat hamburgers in the backseat of the black sedan.
Peeling foil wrappers down the buns, mustard trails
on our fingers, the driver muddles through traffic, clipping
side-mirrors of buses across lanes. This Acura and driver
belong to the government. My cousin sits on his knees,
squashes half a burger in his hand, hurls it out
the window. The mess explodes on the chest
of a young man, walking. He picks up his clicking
bottles off the street. The sedan now whips through,
joins the caravan, escorted and flanked by military
police motorcycles. The air is dry and old. It hasn't rained
for weeks and mountain breaths chill the city. We're late
for Bánzer's inauguration. Radio La Paz predicts more traffic.

ÁREA DE SOL

Above the open corridors they salivate
their sons' triumphs. Men curse the bulls,
hacking up black phlegm and iced red wine.
Moist fingers rake their afternoon beards,
cocked ashen wicks. Flapping programs
to cool their faces, neck scarves knotted, women
pray their picadores on horseback bear young
bull clumsy, thrust banderas on primed skulls.
Bones clack against steel. Shade silvers
and blesses their arid gird. Oiled ears, bloodless
in the sun, waved to all mothers.

MERCY

Aftershocks all day and Guagua Pichincha is on fire. Its mountain steppes singe and burning eucalyptus tastes like cholera. Slick, golden lava tunnels through Quito's houses, invades each laundry room and shower. Basilicas, cemeteries and the airport Mariscal Sucre disappear. The museums that enclose the park and soccer stadium in the slums will not resist. People wait rather than panic. There's nowhere to go. Ash descends invisible at night. There are cries but grandfather is beside me. We smoke Cohibas and I decide to quit medical school, leave Quito for New York. In America, my best friends could be Irish émigrés that teach me curses in English, to use lunch hour for cards and cabarets. Marry one of their daughters in Brooklyn.. Move my family from the borough to the country. My sons teach boys at Sacred Heart curse words in Spanish. Our fathers erase us. Cotopaxi erupts and scorches the valley. Quito's on fire. The cigar almost gone and grandfather in throttled prayer; we're surrounded.

BROTHER'S BURIAL

A small dozer crumples topsoil. My father,
the first-born, directs my uncles, his brothers,

to carry the second-born's coffin.
The first-dead brother – second-born.

This lateral logic, like winds, shifts grass.
The brothers follow the eldest, clip fresh ground

with black polished shoes, buoy the vessel and install
the mahogany conduit into girdled earth. Winds lilt, a tolling,

tolling, tolling bisects all. Anthers stretch, grass beams
pivot and islets of awns convict the tomb.

SIERRA NEGRA

The sun's pink spears
the volcano's skinny
trees. Punishing magma carves

rock, melts palmettos, boils ocean.
Tongues of lava, like pistons,
lap up slope and apron. The caldera

appears wide-mouthed and smoking.
Galapagos hawks fly through ash plumes
toward coastal banks where they will perch

on cacti. The morning sky's fluorescent
hues court grass fires: archipelago sinking.

AT DAWN

Pink starfish at low tide
shiver and pulse under bold
constellations that fall in the ocean.
Hundreds escape and bide their shore,
observing dawn, and I move barefoot
among this garden. Flexing limbs,
they stretch ruddy arms and disks
by millimeters, lounge in new mud,
wait for waves. I kneel, trace paths
of mollusks, my fingers in the sand-
tunnels dug by crabs. The waves,
lifting rays of each starfish, cradle
a dead seagull wrapped in kelp.

MOURNING FOR THE DISAPPEARED

The widows wear black aprons
over their black dresses. Undone hems

drag in morning dust not yet soaked
by water hoses. They march together

like schoolgirls from an age long forgotten.
Sharp cheekbones surface through wrinkles

and rosary beads around necks flop and glint.
The women plod on to bower's markers

off the streets where boys scoot pelotas, learning
to dance like Diego Maradona. The widows kneel

and send aftershocks of prayer through trees.

WATER'S PRICE

Our cisterns emptied months ago
in police raids. Our stolen water
thrown to the ground, let go. At night,
when in rains, neighbors set out plastic
bails on their porches, most with rope
handles, underneath the dripping.
They arrange cups and bowls on flat roofs.
I pinch the house candle-lights off,
move indoor containers out, reconnect
drain pipes from the sewer. We want
fast, heavy rains to fill. No one tells
where water went.

FOR THE STADIUM VENDOR

She stays on her feet the entire match with a steaming
hang-neck platform of empanadas de viento. She carries
and sways through the crowd of knees and fists, through jeers

and hoots for Ecuadorian goals on these concrete steps
of the Estadio Olimpico de Atahualpa. Atahualpa, the last
Inca king, keeps descendants in Quito. The Inca prefixed

mountain names with *coto*, Quechua for throat, to mark
their ascendancy. In the stadium honoring Inca royalty,
his sons and daughters worship the throat that now calls out,

"empanadas de viento!" Her empanadas de viento, of wind, not light
like namesake, but heavy, make her shoulders a permanent hunch;
a monument to years slinging from sloped posture and compacted wind.

ECUADOR'S FIRST OLYMPIC GOLD MEDALIST

Jefferson Perez reschedules our interview
over the phone. "We'll meet at *El Crater*
for lunch in three hours." I couldn't

complain, he's walking laps around the soccer
stadium, skimming milliseconds off his world
record. Already at the bar, I scoop un-popped

corn kernels from the fillet of sole ceviche,
flick defective brown pods against the Marlboro
ash tray. I pin my elbows on the glass-top

counter, daily specials hand written in blue
chalk above the refrigerator full of sodas and beer.
My fingers interlock, an awning over a full

Pilsner, pinched limes soak on a square paper
napkin. Perez calls again, delayed, chased
by children, one foot off the ground.

GENERAL INTERCESSION

The bride and groom warned their guests
not to eat the Peruvian squid. Days later,

guests that did not heed caution arrive
at clinics complaining of awkward balance.

Jellied arms appear siphoned of bone.
Thighs, tender and malleable, swallow

kneecaps and collapse into calves. All muscle
floats in skin as each bit of calcium dissolves

into marrow, bone shafts into suckers
and ink valves. From the hips, new arms sprout,

tentacles pucker and squirm. Noses become beaks.
Tiny squids, undigested, brine the intestines,

funnel through arterial orders, coil
in the chambers of guests' hearts.

NEW APPLIANCES

At Huber's farm, my wife walks over
decomposing gourds, white stringy vines
and dry viscous entrails of tractor-smashed pumpkins.

She picks one up like she would a small child,
left forearm strong. Her veins and tendons throb,
rushing blood stops, unaccustomed to such

weight in her arms. Pine straw and black inch slugs
swoosh off the round body from her fingers,
palms panning over curves and bumps. She checks

for mold and rot. She carries hers through the muddy patch,
boot heels unplugging roots from the ground, scoping
various spots along trenches for another.

DYE

Naked under chrome faucet penciling
lukewarm water, her face in the convex
drain stop, allelic reflections, cheeks, eyes and nose
indistinct but separate. Those, she'll pass
to her unborn daughters. Hands, a new basin,
bring water to mouth.

With right thumb and forefinger he pulls
the left glove's rubber wristband and releases
it to smack skin. He ties her hair back loose
with ribbon. Smoothes dark-brown deep
onto scalp. Its paleness shocked. She tells him
to pull the hair back harder. Plastic taut on fingernails
he rakes her skull. The ribbon flitting to floor, he dyes.
Gloves greased in permanent brown.

COMPLIMENTARY BARS OF SOAP

The apartment's living room floor above
the Metro Café collapses. Furniture funnels
down. The sofa, a deadhead freighter,
crashes into the aquarium. Busboys and dishwashers

round up missing crustaceans. Shoeboxes full of letters,
matchbooks and complimentary bars of soap scatter.
The maitre d' and Fire Marshall rule out termites.
From the vestibule a materfamilias stares
at the ceiling's cavity, wires dangling from pink insulation,
elliptical tenets and her canceled reservation.

RECORD BREAKING HEAT

The new cat sharpens his claws
on furniture like a welterweight,

flares of druidic enterprise conducted
in pawing jabs. He sheds everywhere

and gnaws at the hibiscus brought in
from freeze that never came,

its flowers stunned and recessed.
My toddler in the other room must

resent me and the plastic mattress cover
that sticks to his naked limbs and back.

In bed most of the time, I sweat through
sheets, but there's a new binary –

the cat sleeps on my chest instead
of my wife and he sharpens his claws,

leaves lobes of blood where
he walks and kneads at night.

LOS ALBAÑILES DE HIALEAH

Santos chops and cubes
pork Fritada. Serves the meat
on corn tortillas. Fries plantains.
Preserved of their sweetness,
they won't taste like meat.

Juana shaves ice with round
metal graters. Pours papaya juice.
Los albañiles de Hialeah
form a line on the street,
buy a plate lunch,
eat the cooked food.

They chew the Fritada,
slowly, allowing hot
onions and peppers to burn
their tongues just enough.
Each man sits on his cooler.
Carlos speaks of the brief
disappearance of Fidel - nothing new.
Ignacio chain-smokes
menthols. Felipe tosses
burnt onions.

Santos sweeps around
his old propane stove.
Stray dogs make their rounds
for chunks of discarded
pork, rice and peppers. He pushes
the fallen meat and vegetables
over the curb. The stream of water
heads for the city drain.

IROQUOIS MANOR SHOPPING CENTER

The strip mall injects cracking
purple light into low clouds,
infusing free radicals and spreading
laconic weight. Clouds are now
summering and thick, ceiling,
forcing contact, like Biloxi's dusk
heavy upon the gulf. These night
clouds descend on the parking lot,
cars kept running, scrums of shoppers
rolling bascarts with rusty wheels –
unhinged windmills pirouetting
over asphalt. Catfish and fried
noodles from Vietnam Kitchen
upend streetlights, pedestrians
and Peppermint Bar patrons.
The drunk, waiting for taxis, vomit
on the curb. There's no moon,
no Beaux-Art façade, only neon
remains night's docent.

LA PLAZA MAYOR

Conchita's hands are scabbed
and calloused from knitting
thousands of napkins,
place mats and tablecloths.

Her face touches mine
for a kiss — my pressing
thanks for a long wool blanket.

Her Quiche accent drowns
in the foot traffic of La Plaza
when she walks away,
calling out what she carries.

I follow her with my eyes,
but lose Conchita
among many women

with stacks of red, purple,
green and gold cloths
over shoulders, on their heads
and around waists.

So many women of La Plaza Mayor
calling out what they carry,
like prayers and confessions.

II.

VIEUX CARRÉ

THE BELL RINGER OF ST. LOUIS CATHEDRAL

Her body recoils
like a pistol,

spine whips
and sluices

with each clap
on metal,

with each boom
off dome.

The menagerie
of tongues

and crowns
jettisons tolls.

Hammers smack
bronze curves

and skirts. Each
bell fatigues, cannon

after cannon. She
clasps to ropes,

bells on pulleys
and flat peals

over the square.
She mouths

a dull, bowing,
beautiful.

MICHELANGELO

"Tell me what to do."
He spatters ebullience

and prayer in husky
whispers to unfinished

Pietà. Hands reach
for would be folds

in the Virgin's shroud.
So far from definition,

shapes remain quadrangular.
Resigned to smooth

cankerous grains he
hammers and files

the marble cortex. He suspects
Christ's masculine tendons

would have sagged
there, on his mother's

lap. The place
where active cells

failed to synapse, failed
to reach voluntary muscles.

MONOTONIC JUBILEE

A tape measure clicks out each
centimeter from the mechanical
spool. Her thumb presses the first unit
below her armpit. With dancer's
flexibility, she wraps the tape around
her back to pinch the circumference
of numbers in place. She reads digits
upside down. Her husband's breakfast
pains on the balcony: milk in coffee cools
to flesh, a finch pecks at the toast. Below
the Vieux Carré. He's at their hosiery
updating the bookkeeping and lace
inventory: a caliper's bulbous tallies.

AVOCET COUP

Refugees, second wives, and cowled
monks squeeze through blear
tourists. A corpse floats

on the surface of the Seine. Water chops
and gulps, pounds the scorched
breasts and face. Birds swarm

over. Fledged men on bridges try to snag
the body out of the water with hooking
ash-poles and nets. Timbery sirens call

all to notice. Police arrive with shotguns.
They fire at the chalky sky; abate
the birds from devouring.

VIEUX CARRÉ

Vulcanologists speak of decay,
loss and relic as Pompeii resigns

to malarial grievance, to the alluvial
flats of its harbor. Pompeii's a parapet

fastening the dead to annulment. Their open
mouths sprout fruit and ilex flashes

through vellum bodies. There's a cast
over the immobile leavening.

The sun kilns the Mediterranean,
flecking translucent greens upon

membranous gray. Pompeii's fevering
from tides and thumping magma

underground. An asylum of heat
will rise, the drupe of a womb.

PRIX FIXE

She lives simultaneously
in centuries. It's something

remarkable, like a sneeze,
breathless and gelatinous.

On accepted Holy Days,
she abstains from sex

and breakfast. But today she
will not, will not go to vespers,

will not receive benediction, will not
fast. On the Metro, her rosary droops

through her knuckles. The cross,
a pendulum bob, measures the long

leaching crawl, the acceleration
of the train, her pilgrimage.

Q STREET CANAL

The cashier is no longer afraid of dying.
Tonight, she'll hand customers out-of-ink pens to sign

credit card slips, fidget in the drawer, break
dollar bills and count change incorrectly. After second-shift,

she'll hang her apron in her locker, punch her time-card
right on the hour and slip a dry ballpoint into the front

shirt pocket of the night manager. She'll smile at him,
hop over the customer service counter, snag a pint

of Buffalo Trace whisky and sprint out of the store.
She'll chase the Union Pacific on foot along Kincaid

until it steers away for Bend and Mount Jefferson.
She'll find a grassy quay on the Q Street Canal.

The damp night will soak through her clothes. Fingers of light
from distant cars will dazzle her until she finishes the bottle.

NOT AN AGE FOR SAVING

Boumsong directs his eyes their way
but keeps head still, transfixed
in conversation. "They're assassins.
And there go the investigators. They eat
breakfast at Le Commerce every Tuesday."
His dark skin signals restlessness. Goose pimples
salute hot January sun. Ribs, ship beams
under construction, rise visible through white
sleeveless cotton tee. His heavy work jeans
bunch and squint around the ankles. We enter
the cigarette shop on Rue de Rivoli and his organs
relax. He breathes, buys a copy of L'Equipe. We play
the national lottery on the counter. The copper bell
on the door announces patrons. He clutches
my forearm, the coin stutters on the ticket
like flat chalk on sidewalks. Gray shavings spill
on the floor. He whispers that we could smuggle
ourselves out of the country with the winnings.
It's an old habit. I remind him there's no need.
We're not refugees. We carry American passports.

RIPENING MORNING

I pull open thin cotton
curtains; they squint
from sunlight, gauze wrap
dust beads. I hook metal
buttons on corduroy overalls,
lace-up boots. Dew webs
on the tired laundry lines
heavy with quilts. A train
roughs the distance.

She chain-smokes
in her kitchen. Boils opaque
water, rinses berries
in a cauldron. Steeps
Darjeeling tea. She lifts
the mattress out
of the couch, unfolds
its curves. Smoothes
sheets. Cigarette ash
falls on carpet.

I knock on her back door;
lap up the smoke
off her chest,
taste unbroken habit
in her mouth.

CAN'T SEE

At night, we make love under cedars near
the falls and wait. She swears Sasquatch
lives by Cumberland Falls. Says he migrated
from the Northwest just to see the moonbow,
and that once, while hiking Lake Bluff Trail,
rounds of silt balls and seedlings flew
at her from the deep hollow. She calls
him a prankster. Who else could heave
such thick boughs and stone projectiles,
she reasons. She says he must have gone home,
that it's the rain he missed and the skin
of the Pacific earth.

RED RIVER GORGE

Teenage boys with buck
knives chip initials
into land bridge
sandstone. Panicked bigleaf
magnolias and yellow buckeyes spit
seeds against the lichen
covered rock arch. Kentucky
augite gouged. The boys call
bird dogs back
to the hollow. Mouths
full of quail, muddied
feathers stuck to snouts
and ears. Shotgun shells
in the nettles. The boys walk
chucking acorns into Red River.
Pouches stuffed
with northern bobwhites.
The covey roosted
near the ground.

DOUBLE—BIRTH

Improbably, two foals clumsily approach
their mare. Thin phalanxes and coffin bones
buckle as hoofs slip in the morning grass.
They trust hock joints, pick up gallop,
one snout knocks the other. Breaths fog
the air. The mare's a quay in bluegrass
panicles and her young are muscular
vessels that fleck moisture off their black
pelage. They'll run this birth coat off.

TRAPPIST, KENTUCKY

He hatchets hickory bark
into kindling chips, swings axe
side-armed into a cedar, leaving
it clung to the trunk under blued
needles. Church bells across county
lines circle him. Silt gathers on Salt
River's banks as harried water steals
poplar leaves from Gethsemani's
cemetery. Bourbon mash cooks,
limestoned water boils in copper vats,
whisky stills in white oak barrels.
Ryed air tilts, falls on the abbey's
lichened headstones. November'd come,
like briars pricking buffalo on the march.

EXPOSED VEINS

Folding the sun across iced
hollows, aspen shadows
engrave the gorge. Cold
descends and the wind busts
once taut winter tree bark,
clearing limbs and trunks. Again
birds notch branches with beaks,
they chip away the frozen primer
cleaning out torpid seeds
leaving only slivers of walnut
and pinecone shell. Shocked black
boughs grope ice spears that drip
in heat, now immobilized.
Night in Kentucky agrees
with ice, each fells the woods
and the aspish horizon. Gummed
branches decay with sap
marbleizing in narrow copper
trails that wind over each tree.
What's left of the woods
remains for the pecking.

FALLS OF THE OHIO

A tugboat pulls a barge hauling
coal and timber. High mud
water splits. The river's locks
empty and fill, glints
in the current. Downstream,
the falls of the Ohio expose the patch
reef of clams and sponges, golden
rods and stinging nettles wilt. My arm
shudders and I inhale the humid air, suffering
from the altitude of this bridge;
flipped a coin into the Ohio
where Cassius Clay threw his medal.

STANDING ZONE ONLY

21C Museum Hotel, Louisville, Kentucky

A red plastic life-size penguin stands in front of our suite's door. There are others in the lobby, gallery restroom, restaurant, on the roof ledge, behind the bar and by Reservations. Through a window at Proof on Main, the hotel bar, I see the valet on the street burst through a steam cloud that rises from grated sidewalk. He's chasing a parking violator into the lobby. I'm standing at a cocktail table with my wife, brother and his date. The violator orders a drink. The valet yanks the back of the man's shirt collar, presents him with direct orders to move the car out of the passenger pick up / drop off zone before the tow is called. I deduce all this through hand signals and lip reading. The man waits for his drink, will not move outside with the valet. I know the bartender calls the concierge, a man who looks like young Che Guevara; tidy black beard and straight black hair combed back and slicked with pomade. The concierge comes into the bar like a hound, all smiles and eager, but fierce with purpose. The valet and concierge escort the man out and he disappears into the steam. Our table crowds from strangers trickling in for drinks, obstructing my view of the situations at the bar. A waitress tussles a patron that strikes a match. The docents immediately remove a woman and her Dachshund on leash. I'm looking through them trying to find the valet. Those red penguins monitor guests, like the valet and concierge, tactile and persuasive, the genesis of hospitality and order.

HANDS—FREE FLUSHING

We're amnesiacs, taking
possession of consonants.
We halve white

antacid tablets, scatter
them on gilded shaving
tray, swallow Bob

Dylan—the topical. His fingers
sire more than dissent.
We consume

too much saltwater. Our tongues
melt. They're stinted,
vowels bolted up in stalls.

PARKWAY CONSTRUCTION

It's morning in southern Appalachia
and he flips the windshield wipers
to clear the thin condensation. The vinyl blades

stutter across the glass as he catches
two mosquito hawks copulating. They're crushed
into each other in quick swipes. Black husks

glaze the pane. Morning wants to orange
the sky. Headlights squat in fog. He stirs
in his seat, stretches his legs, opens

the windows. Clingmans Dome pierces low clouds
like bayonets and blue firs. Traffic stalled for miles
and there's no open road to Alabama.

SUNSPOTS

Uncle recognizes the boys that hold his rabbits,
just killed, draining blood, over his bed. He sees
the Alexander eyes in each of the boys - freckled grays.
Earlier that night they canvassed uncle's acres, bound
his farmhands with rope and left them huddled in fields,
sucking air through broken mouths. They were socked
with their own tools: shovels and hoes, empty whiskey
bottles and rifle butts. The polished oak ends stained
red. The boys unhooked rabbits that hung low
from the sycamore branches near the house.
Uncle didn't say much before he died,
just welcomes the boys back home.

HOG KILLING WEATHER

Sows hooked on the walls of the barn,
hind shanks hung raw, bellies split open,
hearts on sawdust, fetlocks swept up in piles.
We saved their hooves in tin pails, chopped
above the phalanx. Mother jarred
and labeled each season.

Slicing bacon, cleaving hunks of pork
for the grinder, I counted scars on my hands.
Palms up, sawed nicks and bites, scabbed
thumbs, pruned as if long soaked in water.
Those blood stained blades and lips of hooks
clipped hands, again and again, buried me inside
the slaughter, fried on the skillets.

RED TENNESSEE

A Franciscan monk at the window seat in front of you
brokers the young flight attendant's final confession.
She's been unfaithful to her husband. You block out
the details, second engine fails. The flight attendant buries
her face in the monk's black habit and forces kisses on his lips.
The plane freefalls and you flip open the cell phone.
You don't speed-dial – you press each number. You say
goodbye to your girlfriend: your envoy, and she will miss you.
Palms dry and you regret throwing away the apple at the security
checkpoint. You'll never have its flesh crackle in your mouth,
its resurrecting aroma, pulp cowling your molars. You go ahead
and smoke, take that final isotopic drag. Look out the window –
the Cumberland splits Nashville, nourishes all those trees.
November's a long recession of chlorophyll.

US IN A MIRROR

It's done. Filliped match spit light, our faces
fire in expressionless orange. Her hard violent
lips pull ember to the filter. Snapping thin
paper reels. Crisp tobacco burns, departs
into her body, rifles through her nostrils
against my jaw shaved smooth. I flick the match
into the toilet, it hisses. Ash falls
on tile. Our torsos swallowed by the room's
dismissive gray. Rosined muscles, taut,
she prepares to breathe for one.

THE OVATION

This morning I swept the abbey grounds,
raised hours, looked for Thomas Merton's

grave. Like the Trappist, my prayer was labor.
Giant, dry poplar leaves under my feet

lauded, their song sent off rhizomed earth
up limestone sepulchers. In the gift shop,

Abbot Bernard gave me a hunk of bourbon fudge
and directions to the headstone. I never found

Merton, but dulled letters announced others, priests
and sisters long part of Kentucky. Still, I wanted vigil

for Father Louis, as he was known here. Where to leave
the soil from Prades, carried so long in this breast pocket?

FLAT LOUISIANA

The Mississippi slouches
through Baton Rouge, brown,

flattening Louisiana. There's a tin roof
home on the canal to Whisky Bay

under the locomotive overpass
where freight's hauled by red

steam engines. A woman
in white, too big, man's shirt,

sweated to the skin, looks down
a channel of crape myrtles,

pink and fossilized in sunlight.
Killing mosquitoes has become her moral

imperative. Her child sits like a hare on sod,
unplugging strawberries clean from their crowns.

MODERN GLOW

Mississippi 49 resurfaces from clogging
winter snow. Spring's gloom thickens
longleaf pines and inflames the absorbing asphalt.

Night cranes on the hollows and bogs,
pries highway cracks by millimeters.
Unispiraled wire, sheathed in plastic,

compressed beneath the gravel, now sprouts
like switch grass through the unfrozen
road's fault-lines. The ungrounded electric circuits
charge topsoil and flax. Distant light, utterly spent.