

Paul Martínez Pompa

How to Hear Chicago

Here a spirit must yell
to be heard yet a bullet

need only whisper to make
its point—sometimes I imagine

you right before your death
with an entire city in your ears.

After Words

Even the sidewalk aches. Burnt out street
lights bow down as if ashamed. Somehow

the fat oak on the corner dodged the bullets.
So did the bus-stop bench no one ever sits

on. A child, her mother, both struck
with panic moments after the first pop.

There's something surreal about being
shot at. How the snap of gunfire

pauses you. Then the rush of blood,
like an electric shock, to the brain. Horror

& elation of being alive. Soon crucifixes
& candles will drape this corner

like a hand-me-down blanket. Of course,
no one seen nothing. Only the sound

of lead wedged in a young man's back.
After the neighbors, the cops will

interrogate the liquor store security
video across the street. This chore

of solving the crime, like trying to piece
together a jigsaw puzzle, blank side up.

Busted Lullaby

lull of determined
thumps against his head & back
again & again

again lull again
head thumps & determined his
against of & back

back again against
thumps of & lull & his head
determined again

3 Little Pigs

Me & uncle in a car when a police pulls us over yelling aiming his gun at
uncle's head when second police comes with more sirens & fear & get
down on the floor uncle tells me & don't move & I don't when the first
police pulls uncle out pushes to the street & slugs his head *POW!* his
back *CLUNK!* when third police arrives & now 2 police aiming 1 police
spraying & 1 uncle with fire in his eyes with snot from his nose when
at last a police lowers his gun says wait that's not the guy sorry amigo
& they all leave.

Police Dog

it's all just
play to wrap

your mouth
around a man's

wrist barely
break skin

to growl tug
hold on till

the officers
arrive only then

do things
get serious

Night

The air is like gunmetal.
An explosion
of music rattles a van's shell as it waits

the stoplight. I cross the street
and my breath rises
blends into the night

like a car alarm.
A man clutches frozen
towels and a tip box outside CITGO's car wash.

His face—scarf-smothered
ninja-style
as if seeing and breathing were done with

the eyes alone.

The clerk inside looks
vulnerable until I spot mounted cameras.

What else—pistol? Baseball bat?
Something defensive
deadly

tucked under the counter.

I continue
home in skin not safe to be at night.

Want

As July overwhelms the city
like a drunk lover & the shade

offers nothing but an illusion
of cool, a cluster of sun-whipped

men leans against brick that looks
more chewed up steak than wall.

They want work & wait here
in the hot for an offer. One man

wipes sweat from above
his lip while another sits still

as death. An oil-pissing truck
staggers by & stops—waves

of heat rise from the hood
as a faded-green sleeve hangs

out the window & summons
three men standing to the side.

After they leap onto the bed
like Olympic athletes, the truck

farts & pulls away to its next job.
A man left behind tilts his head up

as if ready for the sky to burst
& soil everything with water.

Bones

Your feet are a slow train
wreck of cuneiforms
& metatarsals fallen off

track. Too many overtimes
standing, bagging melon & meat
frozen peas & six-packs wedged

careful against egg cartons
loafs of bread
tomatoes that piss if touched

too hard. At home you stand
at the sink full of yesterday's
plates sauce-caked pots

butter knives tough
with peanut butter.
Tonight you fall

asleep in a chair trying
to ignore the 52 bones of your feet
each one humming its own pain.

While Late Capitalism

[Crammd-in-&-bangin-against-each-othr-in-a-dark-aluminm-box-mostly-women-severl-childrn-&-some-infants-fuss-an-assuring-sound-in-this-lack-of-oxygen-they-say-drops-em-like-fleas-or-like-th-man-who-died-standin-6-hrs-into-th-trip-more-nuisance-than-grief-since-no-one-in-th-truck-knew-him-a-woman-kind-enough-draped-her-limp-babys-serape-over-th-mans-head-which-nods-back-&-frth-with-each-bump-in-th-road-thank-god-th-corpse-dont-smell-but-th-hot-piss-stink-is-making-bodies-vomit-on-bodies-stuffd-next-to-them-must-feel-like-days-since-th-coyote-lockd-th-trailer-door-&-theres-little-struggle-now-except-a-woman-trying-to-scratch-a-hole-thru-th-rig-wall-as-she-prays-some-phrase-or-word-some-idea-that-doesnt-translate-well-in-English]

Nightshift

After the rake & shovel,
after the sun & dirt, he pulls on
his botas, clasps his *Durango*

belt buckle. It's Saturday
night & the pearls of his red
collared shirt are snapped

& ready for the San Louis—
restaurant turned discotheque
by evening. Two shots

of whiskey get things going,
twenty-five cent bottles
of Old Style buzz the rest

of the night. After the chairs
& tables are pushed against
the wall, the Mexican sextet

begins, and the stepping
& twirling carves thru the thick
of cigarette smoke & musk.

One woman's toes are stuffed
like gravel into size-six
heels, blemishes concealed

by Swap N' Shop stockings.
In the dim light she doesn't
notice the dirt & scars

embedded into the hands
that hold her close while she
flitters to the music

and sweeps the tiled floor
dancing fast, then slow,
then fast again.