

Richard Blanco

Mother Picking Produce

She scratches the oranges then smells the peel,
presses an avocado just enough to judge its ripeness,
polishes the Macintoshes searching for bruises.

She selects with hands that have thickened, fingers
that have swollen with history around the white gold
of a wedding ring she now wears as a widow.

Unlike the archived photos of young, slender digits
captive around black and white orange blossoms,
her spotted hands now reaching into the colors.

I see all the folklore of her childhood, the fields,
the fruit she once picked from the very tree,
the wiry roots she pulled out of the very ground.

And now, among the collapsed boxes of yucca,
through crumbling pyramids of golden mangos,
she moves with the same instinct and skill.

This is how she survives death and her son,
on these humble duties that will never change,
on those habits of living which keep a life a life.

She holds up red grapes to ask me what I think,
and what I think is this, a new poem about her—
the grapes look like dusty rubies in her hands,

what I say is this: *they look sweet, very sweet.*

Shaving

I am not shaving, I'm writing about it.
And I conjure the most elaborate idea—
how my beard is a creation of silent labor
like ocean steam rising to form clouds,

or the bloom of spiderwebs each morning;
the discrete mystery how whiskers grow,
like the drink roses take from the vase,
or the fall of fresh rain, becoming
a river, and then rain again, so silently.
I think of all these slow and silent forces
and how quietly my father's life passed us by.

I think of those mornings, when I am shaving,
and remember him in a masquerade of foam, then,
as if it was his beard I took the blade to,
the memory of him in tiny snips of black whiskers
swirling in the drain—dead pieces of the self
from the face that never taught me how to shave.
His legacy of whiskers that grow like black seeds
sown over my cheek and chin, my own flesh.

I am not shaving, but I will tell you about the mornings
with a full beard and the blade in my hand,
when my eyes don't recognize themselves
in a mirror echoed with a hundred faces
I have washed and shaved—it is in that split second,
when perhaps the roses drink and the clouds form,
when perhaps the spider spins and rain transforms,
that I most understand the invisibility of life
and the intensity of vanishing, like steam
at the slick edges of the mirror, without a trace.

Varadero en Alba

i. *ven*
 tus olas roncadas murmuran entre ellas
 las luciérnagas se han cansado
 las gaviotas esperan como ansiosas reinas

We gypsy through the island's north ridge
ripe with villages cradled in cane and palms,

the raw harmony of fireflies circling about
amber faces like dewed fruit in the dawn;

the sun belongs here, it returns like a soldier
loyal to the land, the leaves turn to its victory,
a palomino rustles its mane in blooming light.
I have no other vision of this tapestry.

ii. *ven*

*tus palmas viudas quieren su danzón
y las nubes se mueven inquietas como gitanas,
adivina la magia encerrada del caracol*

The morning pallor blurs these lines:
horizon with shore, mountain with road;
the shells conceal their chalky magic,
the dunes' shadows lengthen and grow;

I too belong here, sun, and my father
who always spoke paradise of the same sand
I now impress barefoot on a shore I've known
only as a voice held like water in my hands.

iii. *ven*

*las estrellas pestañosas tienen sueño
en la arena, he grabado tu nombre,
en la orilla, he clavado mi remo*

There are names chiseled in the ivory sand,
striped fish that slip through my fingers
like wet and cool ghosts among the coral,
a warm rising light, a vertigo that lingers;

I wade in the salt and timed waves,
facing the losses I must understand,
staked oars crucified on the shore.
Why are we nothing without this land?

Chilo's Daughters Sing for Me in Cuba

They folded and shaped each banana leaf
like a paper flower with their calloused fingers
to make the tamales, filled with thirty ears
of cornmeal ground by hand. They helped
Ramon with the slaughter yesterday, seasoned
the pork overnight with salt, cumin, bay leaves.
They culled through every grain of wild rice
and every pound of black beans they could buy
on the black market. They sold three months
of soap rations for a string of garlic, crushed
the garlic, had enough olive oil to make *mojito*
from the *yuca*. They pulled the *yuca* from the soil
of their father's field this afternoon—washed it,
cut it, boiled it—until its heart bloomed open,
tender and white as its flower. They prepared
jugs of watermelon *refresco* and set the table
for twenty with borrowed plates and tin cups—
but no napkins. Now, they serve their dishes,
stand around us, and begin singing a cappella
for me, glad I've come to see them again, to sit
at their table, eat what their hands have made,
listen to their songs. Rosita sings old boleros
for our *tíos* and *tías* still in love with love.
Nivia sings *danzones* to honor our grandfathers
who'll be buried in the same ground they tilled.
Delia sings the old *décima* verses of *guajiros*
who made poetry out of cutting sugarcane.
And we all sing *Guantanamera*, over and over
again—*Guantanamera* because today the food
is plentiful, the earth continues to give them
what they need—*Guantanamera* for the lyrics
that praise the good people of this country
where the palms grow—*guajira Guantanamera*
because the revolution that never ends will
never change them, their stories, this land.

What Is Not Mine

I wake to find you've left, and left a note: *Please wait for me, I'll be right back* scribbled over the seal of an envelope with your key, just in case I want to leave your home that I've borrowed two days. I don't know where anything is or belongs, only that it is exactly January in the windows, as I wait, a thing among the stillness of things that are not mine: the upside-down cups I haven't drunk from, stacks of plates like faces I've never met, the ferns I've never watered, books in rows like an audience that has watched us undress, the sheets iced over your bed, a bud vase on your nightstand, next to the black hands of a clock like mime gesturing an end to our time together. I'll leave, leaving only the swipe of my hand over the bathroom mirror, whiskers on a razor, a mug of thickened coffee, traces of my cologne and cigarettes on a pillow. And my only defense will be that I must return to what's mine, not wanting to, but having to become who I was, before I was here, unsure of just how the bare branches can bear winter.

Crossing Boston Harbor

The horn blares—once—twice—sounding like iron, a dull and heavy slap across the wind's face.

And if the wind could have a face, it would resemble these strangers, blank as paper dolls propped up against the railing as the propeller torque vibrates through the vessel, slowly peeling the hull away

from the barnacled dock, the limp ropes coiled like dry roses on the metal deck, the anchor up

like a rusty bow hung on the bow, and we move all together, at the same speed, to the same point.

The ferry's chine makes an incision across the bay, its churned waters bleed a wake of lustrous blue

behind us as we head west, scanning the coastline nested with gables and fringed with flocks of sails,

their peaks waning out of sight into memory, until there's nothing left to measure my distance against.

So much of my life spent like this—suspended, moving toward unknown places and names or

returning to those I know, corresponding with the paradox of crossing, being nowhere yet here,

leaning into the wind and light, uncertain of what I might answer the woman to my right, anchored

in a flutter of cottons and leaning over the stern, should she lift her eyes from the sea toward me

and ask: *So, where are you from?*

Mexican Almuerzo in New England

for M.G.

Word is praise for Marina, up past 3:00 a.m. the night before her flight, preparing and packing the *platos tradicionales* she's now heating up in the oven while the *tortillas* steam like full moons on the stovetop. Dish by dish she tries to recreate Mexico in her son's New England kitchen, taste-testing *el mole* from the pot, stirring everything: *el*

chorizo-con-papas, el picadillo, el guacamole. The spirals of her stirs match the spirals in her eyes, the scented steam coils around her like incense, suffusing the air with her folklore. She loves Alfredo, as she loves all her sons, as she loves all things: *seashells, cacti, plumes, artichokes.* Her hand waves us to circle around the kitchen island, where she demonstrates how to fold tacos for the *gringo* guests, explaining what is *hot* and what is *not*, trying to describe tastes with English words she cannot savor. As we eat, she apologizes: *not as good as at home, pero bueno . . .* It is the best she can do in this strange kitchen which Sele has tried to disguise with *papel picado* banners of colored tissue paper displaying our names in piñata pink, maíz yellow, and Guadalupe green—strung across the lintels of the patio filled with talk of an early spring and *do you remembers* that leave an after-taste even the *flan* and *café negro* don't cleanse. Marina has finished. She sleeps in the guest room while Alfredo's paintings confess in the living room, while the papier-mâché skeletons giggle on the shelves, and shadows lean on the porch with rain about to fall. Tomorrow our names will be taken down and Marina will leave with her empty clay pots, feeling as she feels all things: *velvet, branches, honey, stones.* Feeling what we all feel: home is a forgotten recipe, a spice we can find nowhere, a taste we can never reproduce, exactly.

Time as Art in The Eternal City

The first shadows appear like cells slowly dividing from every tree and lamppost while my first words divide from me onto my journal, trying to capture how dawn light melts over the city's blank windows and its ancient doors, opened a thousand-thousand mornings to the sun with questions, and closed on the moon's face without answers. All the days that have fallen through these courtyards and alleys, the lives that have worn these cobblestones gray, all the gray doves that have been cast into flight by how many church bells? After all the centuries

that have been tolled, hour by hour, and disappeared above these domes, can it matter that I'm here now: watching the bougainvillea blaze over the terraces, counting on the morning to dive into the fountains, flicker over coins, light the water up with my wishes? Today, a temple will lose yet another stone that will continue being a stone, and the Colosseum will move again through its own shadow. Today, the murdered and murderers will be remembered and forgotten, and an empire pardoned for the sake of its beauty in this city where time is an art. Today, a tourist once again sits at a café with an espresso, a pen, waiting to enter the Pantheon, waiting to gaze up into its oculus, opening like a moonful of sunlight in its dome, ready to stand in that beam of light, to feel something radiant, and write it down.

In Defense of Livorno

The dove-white hull glides into port just after sunrise. We rise to a hum vibrating from the engine room up to our bunks nine decks above the sea, expecting something postcard-ish in the porthole, something very Italian, very Mediterranean. Perhaps an arc of mountains dotted with villas, a legion of sailboat masts at bay, or a harbor of weathered rowboats bobbing on a quilt of seawater greens. Not this sea of blue, yellow, and red freight cars stacked like toy blocks, not the blotches of oil on the docks, not the acrid grind and burn of diesel engines. At breakfast, from behind tiny glasses of orange juice and porcelain cups of coffee, everyone's eyes are asking: *Where the hell are we?* We're in Livorno, but we're not supposed to see it; we're supposed to herd off the ship into a bus, maneuver through a labyrinth of cargo, ignore the miles of sea wall, and get out of Livorno. We're supposed to pity its empty beaches and bombed-out villas, then cross through the wine and cheese of Tuscany to arrive at Pisa, where we're supposed to follow our guide's orange flag as he marvels over the miscalculation, listen to

his reverent whispers lead us through yet another cathedral, to goggle over altars and paintings commissioned with alms. We're supposed to lap up gelato, buy Tower-of-Pisa ashtrays, then skip to Florence where we're supposed to revere the Medici, as we stroll through *their* palazzos, pausing at *their* paintings to say *hmm* and *wow* and *isn't that amazing*. We're supposed to buy Prada shoes and Gucci belts, get tickets to see David, pretend not to notice his penis, then get back on our bus, awed by the brilliance of humanity, satisfied by beauty all the way to Livorno. We're not supposed to need Livorno: its barrels of oil and pallets of Chianti, its pounds of prosciutto and cans of coffee, its tons of sugar and made-in-China trinkets. We're not supposed to see anything beautiful here, not even the names glazed over the boxcars—Delmas, Yan-Ming, Haypag, Maruba. Cronos, Masto, Maruba—craned through the sky like new words from the gods, arriving from the very heavens.

Somewhere to Paris

The sole cause of a man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.

—Pascal, *Pensées*

The *vias* of Italy turn to memory with each turn and clack of the train's wheels, with every stitch of track we leave behind, the *duomos* return again to my imagination, already imagining Paris—a fantasy of lights and marble that may end when the train stops at *Gare de l'Est* and I step into the daylight. In this space between cities, between the dreamed and the dreaming, there is no map—no legend, no ancient street names or arrows to follow, no red dot assuring me: *you are here*—and no place else. If I don't know where I am, then I am only these heartbeats, my breaths, the mountains rising and falling like a wave scrolling across the train's window.

I am alone with the moon on its path, staring like a blank page, sheer and white as the snow on the peaks echoing back its light. I am this solitude, never more beautiful, the arc of space I travel through for a few hours, touching nothing and keeping nothing, with nothing to deny the night, the dark pines pointing to the stars, this life, always moving and still.