

Sheryl Cuna

## Her Back, My Bridge

She sat blush-cheeked, straight-backed & beautiful,  
thin-waisted & tearless at the window when she first came.  
A crumbling brick sill beneath small elbows. Brown eyes

glisten, wish to receive dresses, jewels from American GI's.  
The street below smelling of dead things, outhouses. Her flowered  
red-green dress, panty hose rolled over bony knees. As a girl

she could dance; she'd scrub poverty with Ajax to find peace.  
She stuffed her cheeks with Mexican food—*Las Tinas*, big vats  
of pintos, rice. Riding the Santa Fe boxcars to pick onions

in fields. Thirteen siblings screaming, sleeping. She was broken  
early by a boy. Found herself on red knees, taken in an alley.  
And the tears, did they come? Her eyes forever worried

by the sun. Has she seen trees sway wind, were clouds and sky  
ever blue-green? Could she kill that boy, now a man,  
with a cast-iron pan? Chihuahita's buildings red and gray

beneath the loneliest polluted sun. She's too old  
to clean now. The state's lady comes twice a week  
to scrub her frail back. They won't scratch

her back *hard* enough, won't dance her age away.  
She's pissed. Wrestling's her favorite thing,  
*Pícale, Pícale*, she screams poking the screen

with a pencil. Her shoes once rubbed ankles  
raw, yet she's sway and swing, her voice a dove's call—  
Jesus, Jesus. She told me one spring of the dove's hopeful

mourning in the fields. She's breathing thin now, her veins  
too thick, her bones hollow, her left eye glaucoma-  
silver. A bedroom mirror covered with pictures,

my own ten-year old American face rosy and cheered.  
She tells me, "I'm ready to die." Her favorite song,  
"La Puerta Negra." The Black Door.

"You've got to be strong in this life—  
*mijita*." Here I am singing the unsung positive capability  
of the desert, how weeds grow orange wildflowers.

### Slow Dancing with Frank Pérez

I called him fish-lips, Frank was all bones,  
dark. His knees sunk in at the sides.  
You could mistake him for a runner.  
When he kissed me, he barely opened  
his mouth. The tip of his tongue peeped  
into my mouth, two fish sucking rubbery  
lips. Fumbling and leaping like salmon  
into a glorious world, its incalculable  
madness and beauty still fresh.  
Our breastless, peckless hurried sway.  
My arches ached from moving tip-toed.  
Our oafish knees and the lyrics  
hummed in meaningless pulses and tones.  
I remember the floor moving,  
the ceiling aflame in colors. Each pain,  
each trope blooms now to real meaning.  
Frank never made it to twenty. He died  
in a parachute accident, a broken young  
body. I still see his black curls, eyes  
two pits of dark innocence. And life is like this,  
hurried and awkward; the way pride swells  
and need takes over, all weary desire.  
The way those lost speak through an old song  
that lives *duende* or heart and steam, knows  
what it means to touch. Smooth songs  
sting something more than sexy, each word  
swells to images, implodes in icons.  
Memory does this, helps us live  
through all the cutting borders,  
the aches of our slow return to bungling  
knees and bony hips.

### Learning to Speak

I forgot how to speak. The old man with a gray  
beard eyed me, waiting for Spanish.

Years of English rumbled something absent, forgotten.  
The Tigua Indian Village, men at the corner bench eating

tamales. Indoors, tables with white Formica,  
floor-tiles peeling. In the steam of cilantro and tomato

children sit cross-legged and sip caldo de res.  
Men smoke afterward in faded jeans and t-shirts lightly rise

around their pecs in the wind. It is how home is all  
that's left in the end. The way we all return forever exiled.

History in mud houses and shady river-trees. Canal water  
drifts. Children poke crawdads with dry branches. I spoke

Spanish broken, tongue-heavy. I was once too proud  
to speak Spanish in the barrio. He waits for my voice.

His eyes generations. My brown skin a scandal on the hard streets  
of El Paso. But, everyone loves a resurrection. Mauricio on a red

motor bike; Bob, a green-eyed white war hero, spits tobacco.  
The sunlit desert and its gold light falling upon us. *Quiero*

*aprender español*, I whisper. He smiles. Blue hills  
in the distance sharpen in an old elegance; the wind  
hushes itself after howling the silences.

## Two Girls from Juarez

Two girls from Juarez hesitantly step toward my desk.  
 "Ms.," one says with a paperback of Plath's *Ariel*

corners folded and coffee stained. "Was she white  
 or black?" One with over-dyed red hair and black

roots announces, "She was prejudiced!"  
 I am now questioning my life in a desert; questioning

as lightning rips the sky like an instant of daylight  
 in the hard black lake of night. In Plath's "Daddy"

a black man bites a woman's heart, and all the wit  
 and the wordplay between darkness and light shrugs.

I am bitten. The girls want to know  
 about Plath's gasps, about her white

eyes in darkness. One wears an electronic  
 bracelet around her ankle.

The other's cheeks red with too much rouge.  
 I imagine they live nights dangerously

in an Oldsmobile near the Rio Grande,  
 that they love for real and they love to love.

I smile at them with no answer. I lost answers  
 long ago and the faces of my colleagues grew ghost-like

and words fell away and the poetry cancer came  
 like a priest for the sacrifice.

## Poesía de Maquiladora

I am swept into a sadness, still  
 and unspeakable in sterile rooms where  
 men might as well wear white coats  
 and drink my breath from stethoscopes.

They were so happy to show us  
 the habits of locusts, drain blood  
 into plastic bags of their manufacturing.  
 Tell us, Latina, was it what they  
 assumed it was, broken language,  
 poetry of a lesser nature, a wound?

The way my brown knees  
 slammed hard in the fall  
 from what was left of grace.

My eyes shrunk to slits, my only  
 salvation came in the flight of grackles,  
 the way the moon swelled, striped  
 with red-orange light.

It has rained more this spring.  
 I am sick of having to watch what I say.  
 The grackles have beaten the songs down  
 with their desperate caws.  
 The tree branches scream, too, now.

The most intelligent doctors walk  
 through their patients. Assume a sickness.  
 My mind has pleated itself  
 in a veil of shadows.  
 My body is fading  
 back to an invisible border.

## Pity the Drowned Horses

It is one of those nights when you fall back into childhood  
like the breeze gentle against your half-quiet ears.

The tall Italian cypress still giant to your small eyes,  
the moon lopsided—still, holy, mysterious.

The clothesline droops now and the height of the line,  
once a Herculean reach, is only an arm's length away.

Your feet easily plant themselves on the ground and no longer  
gleefully dangle while arms stretch sinewy & young.

The stars hum still & blessed. You carry the cracked hose  
to water the drying tree, & the dead grass sings a silent hymn,

the water's dribble makes you want to cry, not because the pipes  
are dry like your grandmother's bones, but because the sky

is still, yet moves like the night you turned seven. Here,  
the dry garden hose brings tears to your eyes, and you weep

your insignificance. The dead neighbor's white Chevy truck  
parked in the same spot for years is gargantuan, yet invisible.

Mr. Tellez, try to remember his round face, his broad back  
in a white t-shirt watering the pink and white oleanders.

Were they imagined? Was his face so unimportant? The truck  
looms undisturbed and heavy. The highway buzzes where desert

once sat calmly. Cars replaced screaming children, bicycles  
and the holy ritual of running through the sands native,

dark thighs sweating in what seemed an eternal sun.  
And what do we care for the smallness of another? It's our

own shame, the way palms clench or eyes dart fearfully,  
the way we learn gossip in shadow, talk ourselves

into believing god is listening because we are afraid,  
the shadow on your pale cheek is darkened like the blue

lake of night. All you can do is eye the slow gilded stars,  
the black lake of sky, memory above the forty-foot trees

through a broken branch. The moon waltzes with the veil  
of night clouds and finally water gushes and the tree's roots drink

the last waters, the first waters, holy waters brought down from sky,  
and you still may think of Moses and mist like you did when you

were twelve, and may still imagine god's waters crashing down  
on the heads of your enemies, yet pity the drowned horses.

## An Atheist Learns to Pray

Maybe you found the moon sun-lit in black  
space or gazed at Saturn's blue-red-gold prism.

Slow warmth in an empty universe, light  
became your daily bread, night a starry  
sacrifice. The way darkness paints and blots  
havoc. We always return to beauty  
after the abyss, bruised and cold, learning  
that a rose open to May is unburdened.

Why not swing our hips and sway as leaves chime  
to dawn. One learns from children, a dog's thick  
ribbed breath, the rise and fall of night. Even  
when slandered, one drinks water and the sky.  
Blessed be the way caught among showers,  
the sun later rising like a man listening to god.

## The Colt

The sky glowed its red burning, and the damp  
air smelled of mulch, and the earth called  
itself up inside of me like a smoggy song.

The colt's belly round like a donkey's.  
Wet and frizzled brown hair trotting

behind a brown-white spotted mare,  
proud in its tall-legged towering.

Thin-ribbed dogs running through traffic.

We call far into the distances between us.  
Wind brushes my cheek in a cold need.

All things, drawn to one

another like the flippant tail of a colt  
in a barren field where the flat bed  
of an eighteen wheeler rusts and the tractor  
rests upon its fat tires, and the black eyes

of birds, the wings of crows flutter  
with a deep-throated call of hunger, want  
like a cool shadow over the broken  
neighborhood. Chickens like the fretted  
hard strums of electric guitars run wired

through the yard, squawking then beating the sky.

And there stood a child like an old god,  
running, nipping at the larger horses' legs,  
wild with the birthing, fresh before the earth,  
the wind nothing but its very breath.