

SOURCE NOTES
SEVENTH DECADE



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SYNESTHESIA

What is the sound of a true word
never said? Of our own blood returning
fully assured of its welcome?

What is the sound of this feeling
pouring out of us now like life blood
as it coagulates, dries?

What is the sound of listening
to a stranger's face? To a life story
brought into being purely
by the quality of our own hearing?

What is the sound of love
we never believed in
leaving? Holding fast?
Outlasting us?

What is the sound of a siren's song
to an ear deafened by shell shock?

What is the sound of silence
to a mind that rattles
like an empty bird cage
in a violent wind?

What is the sound of stars settling
into a new constellation that no one
as yet has the wit to see?

What is the sound of a heart,
on the far shore of terror, echoing
the melody of an ancient lullaby?

What is the sound of your being
resounding in me?



IN THESE DAYS OF OUTRAGE

In these days of outrage,
vindictiveness, exhausted
invective, I feel a call
to a god with breasts
and clitoris who refuses
definition, who has a voice
deep and rich as a man's
but smooth as a slow moving river,
who sings constantly
in a language we all yearn
to remember, one that doesn't
dismember, revile or deny.
My whole body comes alive
when she enters my imagination.
I move with the ease of a young girl,
my flesh has the gravitas
of a new mother. I am *of* her.
Of this I have no doubt.

But does that mean I share her keen,
clear mind, the way she can
take us in without the baggage
so at last we realize,
naked, poor, hungry, or imprisoned,
sick or rich,
anxious, jealous, grasping,
hale in body
and harsh in heart,
as rank with success
as we are with failure, that—

we are—and always have been—
fully loved,
we are— and always have been—
enough.



To understand it all returns,
exile, torture, mad love, bewilderment and
wonder.

And reconfigures.
And reconfigures.
And reconfigures.

OPEN VEINS

I take it as a sign
when the pages of my old Galeano book
threaten to fly away
from this rooftop on Calle Crespo,
where I've set it down so carefully
to savor and ponder—
over a hot cup of coffee smoothed with chocolate.
Set it down as if we had all the time in the world
to *recordar*, which Galeano writes
comes from the Latin *re-cordis*,
to return through the heart.
An observation I immediately understood
as a blessing, one that has set the pace,
the theme, for my time here.
I think he might delight in the white flurry,
and question my impulse to pull the untethered
pages back into his original order. For hasn't he,
a decade older than me, recently renounced
the most acclaimed work of his youth?
*Why should I be bound to my style
of thirty-seven years ago?
It was too heavy.*

His gift, he's learned, is what *not*
to say, how to let mystery
circulate freely, between images,
words, moments of exquisite
irony, pain and truth in momentary
equipoise. To understand it all returns,
exile, torture, mad love, bewilderment and
wonder.

And reconfigures.
And reconfigures.
And reconfigures.

WHO SAYS?

Who says water that reaches
the sea has forgotten
its source? Or sweat
that hides now in cumulus
clouds has forgotten my brow?
Who says freedom doesn't have death
as its final destination?
Who says age can't be luxurious,
astonishing, *sui generis*?

THE SECRET SWEETNESS OF VEJEZ

is the way we feel when strange beds
fit themselves to us rather than we to them,
the way we no longer need to translate
the slight hesitation, the sideways glance,
the swallowed sigh or closed eyes—
or shut off the yelp of delight
that rises when we turn the corner
and find the ocean expanding in a pure blue
circle around us as if we are
the axis mundi.

PALOMAS

The mourning doves are tumbling
from the trees scattering small cries
of surprise. Sounds that, eyes closed,
could be mistaken for those of startled
babies, although the fierce, rising
fluster of wings belies this.

On the other side of the tiled wall
a boy of ten I've never seen
bellows with a man's authority
every evening from six to eight.
I've been told he is autistic
and believes he is the lead
singer in a rock band. What I hear
is the purest self-assurance and glee.
Some days his younger brother sings
in solidarity, the rawest of harmonies.
No one ever complains.

It makes me grieve for all the security
I never knew to give you.
It consoles me too. Here, on the balcony,
both of us a million miles and several decades away
from the terrors I once put us through
for love, *pinche, putamadre* love.



JUST BECAUSE

Just because
the little girl
with a snarled curl
in the middle
of her muddied forehead
never said sorry
for being enchanted
by the irresistible glories
of tar, its luminous
blackness spread
like a night sky
under her bare feet, and she
discovering in that gleaming
moon-round reflection
her welcoming twin,
beaming—
just because she couldn't
stop smiling at the memory
did not make her
horrible, *horrible* girl.

Oh, I love her so, how
she looks out of the photo
sitting, grinning, on the hood
of the 50s car, smiling
just because the wind
sings and the sun touches
her skin soft as the fingertips
of the woman who crooned to her
daily, my baby, my beautiful
baby girl with the pretty curls.

Now my own face reflects back that smile
just because she's so wonderfully
stubborn and still believes,
all evidence to the contrary,
that something, someone, somewhere
wants her terribly, fiercely, fully,
exactly, just exactly, as she is.

*I will rock you, rock you, rock you, I will rock you, yes I will.
I will love you, love you, love you, I will love you, yes I will.
For you're my lovely, lovely, lovely, You're my lovely, little girl.*

*WAYS OF MOVING THROUGH
THE WORLD*

The lilt in the walk of Francisco Zúñiga's women
does not belong here in his *país natal*,
rather in his adopted country, in Juchitán,
where bold thick-waisted women
in bright flowing skirts joust
provocatively with aging white men
who stop to buy tamales or an aguacate,
laughing as the color rises in pale lined cheeks
when they jut their breasts and shake their hips
and say, *¡Tan guapo, güero! ¿Quieres mas?*
The bold smiles and bolder laughter ricochet
throughout the mercado as everyone shares
the simple pleasure, given and received, of being seen—
at whatever age—as fully ripe.

The three women here in the sculpture garden in San José
keep walking into their disparate futures
with that same brazen lilt, but the rain and the birds
have etched their faces with something more
somber, silent. And yet they feed me in a way this city
with its *ropas americanas* on every corner,
its modest, caged houses, rubbled sidewalks,
groaning buses, relentless sunshine and ready wind,
its miles and miles of spiraled barbed wire do not.

In el parque nacional, another Zúñiga, Edgar, who shares
a father with Francisco, but is a generation younger, creates
equally monumental statues of men effortfully
unearthing themselves, like so many tragic
reiterations, their arms all stretched in supplication,
their legs still entangled below ground. They know
what it's like never to sever your ties with the land
of your birth, the effort required simply to kneel upon it.

But these women, seen with an emigré's eyes, walk easily,
heads erect, eyes fixed fearlessly on the horizon, becoming one
with the gravitational pull of both the earth and the stars.
They invite me to a similar stance, a similar rhythm,
where I discover a lightness of bearing, a strength of being,
that comes from heading straight into the unknown, heart first.
The only question is, can I take it home with me?

SCORPIO MOTHERS

i

Down here at the long tail of the continent.
wandering into an art gallery, into a meditation
on maternity, I find a photo that makes me think
of us, sturdy hands against a tapestry ground.
They hold, pincerd between thumbs and forefingers,
a large scorpion preserved in a brick of plexiglass.
The gesture is forever ambiguous.
Are the hands pushing away, pulling
near? Is it accusation or source of pride?
No one, truly, loves a scorpion.
But what about us, born under its sign,
with our own roiling, recursive intensities?

You always loved him more, my niece
accuses her mother. Charismatic, beautiful,
hard-working, a passionate protector, a mother
herself, it's only now, in her forties,
her younger brother ten stable years
into a new lease on life, that she can give voice
to this pain. My sister, an unapologetic
Gemini, says brusquely, "Don't you think it's time
you started telling yourself a better story?"

ii

It takes six to seven molts for a scorpion
to mature. To survive, the first molt
must take place riding on her mother's back.
The new exoskeleton is soft, flexible,
but you must keep moving or it will lock you in
tighter than the last one.

I've watched my niece, at home in Brisbane, singing
and dancing with friends to celebrate her own birthday.
How deftly, without losing a beat, she prevents
her adored, mischievous son from picking the cake apart
or blowing out all her candles. "My birthday," she says,
catching his hands in both of hers and claiming
with a single breath what's rightfully her own.

His teachers think he is an *enfant terrible*
on the verge of incorrigible—the way he just shared
the razor blades he unscrewed from pencil sharpeners.
A survival skill taught him by his father, Cuban,
who lived through the famines eating cats and guinea pigs.
She tries to explain, pointing out that her son, such
a generous boy, never thought to hoard. He *shared*.
It's illegal, they tell her, even to throw a boomerang here
in Australia. True, their statutes don't explicitly cover
pencil sharpeners, but it's the spirit not
the letter of the law they adhere to.
"My precious boy," she sobs to her mother.
"Why can't they see what I do?"

My heart aches for her, she who shares my sign.
Can we ever really know what story we are living?
Does anything we say or do return to us exactly
as we released it? How often does our greatest
joy arc back to pierce us?



WHAT IF

What if these enchanting sunsets
could become a way of life,
a recurrent miracle that never loses
its ability to jolt us into gratitude,
suffuse us with awe, however many times,
however reliably it returns?
What if we never ever grew inured?

By we I mean you and me, the way
standing here together every evening this week,
watching all the diffusions of color
that accompany the slow fall of the sun,
we realize we've entered into a oneness
that feels it can easily last another
twenty-one years. *If we do.*

Faces hold a haunting beauty we were never
alive to before. The light doesn't steadily die out,
instead for a full hour the sky pulses with color,
saffron here, pink there, then plum.
No one wants it to end.
Children throw themselves back into the surf.
Young men catch a last wave. Old men
cast nets. And we, my love, are in the thick of it,
indissolubly one with the wash and the hum.



I saw the lines
inside my curved lip
and something magical happened.
My own tree of life
branching.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Synesthesia 1

I

THE SONGS ARE GONE

<i>This Is What I Know</i>	6
<i>The Songs Are Gone</i>	7
<i>La Pregunta Sin Respuesta, Sin Fin</i>	8
<i>Climate Change</i>	11
<i>Accounting</i>	12
<i>This Is My Hate Song</i>	14
<i>When I Turn a Blind Eye</i>	16
<i>I Want to Ask Them</i>	17
<i>In These Days of Outrage</i>	19

CREATING

<i>Creating</i>	22
<i>Carry-Ons</i>	23
<i>Dismissals</i>	24
<i>If I Were to Open That Knot</i>	27
<i>Source Notes</i>	28
<i>Open Veins</i>	31
<i>Girl in the Grip of an Idea</i>	32
<i>Symbiosis</i>	36
<i>Figment</i>	39
<i>This Moment</i>	40

THE SECRET SWEETNESS OF VEJEZ

<i>Who Says</i>	44
<i>The Secret Sweetness of Vejez</i>	45
<i>Carolina Summer</i>	46
<i>I Saw the Lines</i>	47
<i>I Just Want to Lie Up Here in the Dark</i>	48
<i>Flowers on the Sand</i>	50
<i>If I Could Choose</i>	52
<i>The Wind Is Having Its Way Today</i>	53
<i>The Color of Honey</i>	55
<i>Trust the Emptiness Within</i>	56

II

LETTERS TO MY SON, TWENTY YEARS A MAN

<i>Órale, Hijo Mío</i>	62
<i>No Call, No Card</i>	63
<i>Palomas</i>	64
<i>Letters for My Son, Twenty Years a Man</i>	66
<i>Los Voladores</i>	74
<i>Décimas for My Son in his Fifth Decade</i>	77
<i>Call Waiting</i>	80
<i>Monteverde</i>	83

SHAKEN BABY, FOREVER HELD

<i>When the Light Was Waning</i>	88
<i>Where Story Begins</i>	89
<i>I Have Put My Words in Order</i>	90
<i>That's What I Want</i>	91
<i>Dialogics</i>	93
<i>Words That Never Know Air</i>	94
<i>Dangers of Public Speaking</i>	96
<i>Just Because</i>	98
<i>Russian Dolls</i>	100
<i>Mirror Neurons</i>	104
<i>Day of the Dead</i>	107

FAMILY FEELING

<i>Family Feeling</i>	112
<i>There Is A New Story Burgeoning</i>	113
<i>Just Like Everyone</i>	114
<i>Afterlife</i>	118

III

LIFE IN TRANSLATION

<i>Regresaremos</i>	128
<i>Oaxaca, December 2014</i>	129
<i>Departure</i>	136
<i>Now Não</i>	137
<i>Life in Translation</i>	138
<i>Quem Tem Alma Não Tem Calma</i>	141
<i>Voices in a Sevilla Night</i>	145
<i>Hoarding</i>	152
<i>Songs for the Faint of Heart and Misaligned</i>	154
<i>Pura Vida</i>	156
<i>Penetration</i>	164
<i>Ways of Moving Through the World</i>	168
<i>Footprints in the Air</i>	170
<i>Entraining with the Holy</i>	172
<i>It Is So Hard to Leave Valparaíso</i>	175

THE SPACE BETWEEN NOW AND NEVER

<i>We Write to Redeem Ourselves</i>	178
<i>Like a Hermit Crab, I Have Dreams</i>	179
<i>Totems</i>	180
<i>Scorpio Mothers</i>	182
<i>You Can't Speed Up Time</i>	185
<i>The Space Between Now and Never</i>	189
<i>Resonance</i>	192
<i>The Day I Took My Mother to Her New Home</i>	196
<i>In These Days, In This Time</i>	198
<i>I Don't Want to Move Anything Forward Today</i>	199
<i>It's Time to Start Talking</i>	200
<i>What If</i>	203
<i>All Night I Dreamt</i>	204

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	207
-------------------------	-----

AUTHOR	209
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