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THIS WAS IOWA

Juan Felipe Herrera

A feverish air seemed to wave from the flowers.
They opened their charred blossoms; light
curled, uncurled; inside the gold eyes, pollen, sand,
a lifting cane of thin bone.

I was looking at an art book on Georgia O'Keeffe
across from the First National Bank in Iowa City

I didn't want to get lost in there, so I stared away
getting familiar in a small town.

But, I wanted to ignore everything, even
if every thing, now, finally wanted to flush and fly
inside the thick pink lines in my chest.

My mother painted remembrances, absences
on the east side of our tent in Fowler, California.

She always told me farmworkers had the kindest lips.
But, how could they if they always suffered fevers,
tilling row after row, bowing to the sickle-shape
darkness beneath the vines?

We would rise up early,
gazing at the hazel canvas stretching above us;
a frayed wool chasm in clouds. We would spin

golden shafts for a ranch house and
carefully picture the haystacks surveying our land
with their arms crossed, waiting for us.

A few feet away, outside the bookstore, a woman's face
softened into olive oil. You could have seen

the quiet glass of years pouring down the eyes.

She was not crying
or even talking, yet, her hands were shaking, a little.

It could have been a brush of shredded clouds or
the curve of a waterfall, shredded too, colliding
somewhere,
echoing here, across our eyes, in this air.

I mean her face was turning this way,
unknowingly, as if answering to a distant surrender
still smoldering in me, unexpectedly, my mother's
last breath still resounding.

Now it seems everything is alive and burning.
It seems there are resurrections after all, but how
can they all speak at the same hour?

I was asking questions;
a tall man from San Francisco; a worn leather jacket
leaning into the baroque table of the shore.

My coat was indigo with sadness.
You couldn't see my forehead, my hands or my feet.
They were still turning to themselves;
cooing stones in a sand of silence.

I wanted a sparkling fleece
draped around my darkness.

A Chicano boy came up to me
and pointed at the foam biting my legs.
He saw it a while ago, he said.

I remembered him when we played in my backyard,
carving dirt trails for our favorite marble shooters

and later,
carrying perfect eggs from Mr. Raya's falling barn.

And at sixteen, I remembered
how he embraced his small mother when his father died,
holding her heart with the left hand

and in his right hand nothing but a limp hat of air
in the rented room on 11th street, San Diego.

My shirt was open, guiding the cutting breeze,
the salt, the ocean. We wanted to talk all evening.
Then, with his bashful chin he motioned to the
Mid-West,
away from everyone.

This was the upside down night covered
with a powdery sea-green robe. Go there, he said.
Pure phosphor.

There, even the moon was pure phosphor,
a fresh slice inside a black throat. Go there
and you will find me.

I turned away and
began paging through the bibliography
on the back of O'Keeffe's cover.

I wanted to find Steve Biko, or Winnie or Mandela
and ask them about art and walk into their studios and
for once see twenty-five million people painting
one country at the same time.

I never saw that happen in the United States. I couldn't
explain
the odd lights singeing, everywhere. And the mad
turpentine,
spilling from every corner.

And this young man walking so close to me
and now lost?

He was probably out there now. Who knows?
Maybe, walking up Highway 6, hitching to West Liberty,

ready to strike
the translucent shank bone on a conveyor at the I.B.P.
factory.
He had warned me:

this is the Mexican masterpiece of the heartland;
all these lost sinews, hushed stumps of speckled clay;
the crazy brass spines stripped of their common gold
and the furious blood churning from the stone plate.

Look at me!
No one paints this.

But, how to paint it?
Who shall paint it, who?

My belly was full of magnets.
I was being pulled somewhere away from the shade.
Suddenly, I tossed what I had and slammed my fist
on a store front wall.

I didn't care. I wanted to ride the red rings inside the
plywood.
I really wanted to find a rock and then an eagle
devouring a serpent. It was time for the birth of a
nation.

Maybe, it would be full of squirrels
bouncing across the roads never dying
beneath the soft blades of the tire.

I was outside, hanging
in the brightness, the last brightness of the day.

It was never as hot. I was thirsty,
but I didn't want to slow down.

I couldn't drink anyway. It was impossible. What was it?
Was it about infinite brush strokes and singing brushes
and having glowing arms and long sable fingers?

Then, could I create something,
like a watery blue for this thirst?
Or fountain flared arms
for the workers of this hammering world?
Could I make an elegant neck
full of courage and laughter
with the friendly voice of my father?

I was shaking the hair on my head
full of black and white turning
up the long, humid, radiant streets.

Maybe, I was coming home, at last, a farm boy from the
California North,
a tumbling branch of Mexican wind from the Mission
District, maybe
I was finally painting that Matisse-colored storm buried
in my notebooks,
so long ago; green burning against yellow-red with my
bare hands
boiling up from the shore; the lunar eyes of my lover in
my mirrors.
All my spirits, searching for a tender altar of bleached
sea-stones,
the amber crown of fire for my mother's ashes, almost
brilliant, in here
in this oil, this sweat of gnarled stems and shredded
scepters guarded
by the barbed wing of the warrior cricket, going fast
underneath wild corn
without the necessary waters, in the drought of '88. This
was Iowa.

I was standing up kissing the cardinal's scarlet heart.
I didn't want the art anymore; the style, the form.
I was asking questions: can you lead me to the night
dance
of the Holy Cricket and the Empress Cicada?

That is all, I was asking. This is all I need.
I want to meet them: the accomplished poets of rage.

You who rebuke the gods in the galleries,
you who cast away the Pig Masters from the gates of our
hamlets, you
who avenge the Brown families of the desert with the
electric whip
of your wise lightning canes.

Then, somehow,
Mandela's spirit flickered above the hills
for a second, or was it my mother, Lucha Quintana?

I saw an opal wind funnel near the corn fields, I heard a
call
for a covenant between the clouds and their lost rainbow
children.
Then, someone murmured, only insects and birds know
true unity.

I was walking with the cadence of my father, Felipe
Emelio, now.
It wasn't O'Keeffe anymore, or the fettered flames
against
the opaque skin of pages.

I just wanted the eye of the sky, the compassionate iris of
sea-pollen
to greet me with a fanned stairway, a grandmother's
docile bouquet.
Give me back, I sang, this immortal canvas where I have
lived.

Give me back the bundled fires of all our cargos,
the abstract embers blazing beneath me; I want them
unwrapped
from the merciless coals, I want them blurring into wing,
into wetness; they who are the rain for this land,
so parched with thirst and blood and wandering
darkness.

