

1986

Soledad

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In the street a man shouted a drunken *vacilada*,
hermetic pain pulled inside out, mystical
and snickering like a mescal worm, laughter
that stabbed at the light. *Los muertos mueran*,
y las sombras pasan—the dead die, the shadows pass.
But the air they breathed, we breathe. Their faces
backlight our own, our lives spring up
from their dreams—light
in the work of these thick city streets.

In the center of town I saw
an old rusted pump the color of ocher,
color of bloodstone, ancient as the channel of the vulva,
menstrual color. Near it an old woman in a black
rebozo stacked tortillas on a cloth, a *brasero's*
charcoals glowed, and the old Ford motor
used for grinding the *pueblo's* corn chugged along.
There was a smell of oil, smoking meat.
I remember the water's iron taste—I used
two hands to pump it. I drank from a gourd.

I thought of lilies—how they pull water clear through
their green channels. In them was presence,
an ease of future. As for me, watching dark water
splash in the dust, wiping my wet chin on my sleeve,
washing my hands in the earth-colored wet—
I'd have struggle, *la lucha*.

SOLEDAD

When the room echoes in the morning, and air is dust,
when troubles shadow the floor where sun once
struck the *petate*, that's the time
to enter the body and stand firm there.
And if you're a woman,

if you know
the man always leaves, as he came, by surprise—
walk out of the city alone and study land.
On it lemon twilights flash, then a furze of wildflowers,
red. Caught on the eyelid of the pond one moment,
the moon winks and goes. Rain collects in the field,
it is mud, it is worked into rows and rows. A hand
places seed corn or slings the beans out into drills.
It is not male or female, the land—but a power
preoccupied, inventive, free.

I have been with many men. This has nothing
to do with weakness, or desire. More
with a kind of force, sensed blind. Out of nowhere
a man with a burning mission flares—*here*,
now—and the moment takes me under,
ground opens to a core of fire. . . .
What the body knows, I remember.

Our first day together, Mella and I, we watched
a woman weave. She wore the loom, tied to her waist
at one end, the other secured to a tree in the *alameda*.
“I am trying to see what I sense inside,” she said.
She watched her hands at work—her hands moved
fast and full. And yet her eyes knew void.
Negrita, she was dark.

We sat and watched her weave—her eyes were pitiless,
objective, fixed. I didn’t use the Graflex—how could
I photograph that look? She was cold and raw,
yet could have melted the lens—*fuego*, fire
her focus.

By afternoon, white threads flashed through,
and when the light was lower, finished,
Mella bought it for me, a gift.

Yesterday I unwrapped it from newsprint, a simple red *rebozo*, a color of earth good for corn, a solitude of red that sweeps unbroken until near the fringe at one end a white bird soars, one wing unfinished, its feathers raveling into the tassles, and from there into wind as it goes.

I put it on. I put it on and wept.

What is the power of a man and woman? Without opposites that tend towards each other, there's no will to live, no need to heal.

The oppressors have us.

RETREAT TO THE FUTURE

As the Republic's last Cortes disbanded, and the stones of Figueras shook in the echo of bombs, our people, frantic, were shoved from the winter roads by our own troops, disregarded. They only watched as a national treasury—paintings huge in their gold frames—took their places, cradled in the last trucks going out. No one cried,

What have you done? What more can you give?

No theory marshalled the suffering of Spain to right order. I felt its weight as I watched in disgust. I felt love shudder from power and change to an endless debt. Offered a ride, I refused and walked the other way, to the Plaza. There, I sat at a cafe table to wait— for what?