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The Conquistadores

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THE PRISONER

You squat in a Roman prison, your only light
the light from insect wings and the piss trails
of vermin that shine at your feet. How thin
you must be now. The stone walls are as closed
to your prayers as your disciples' hearts.

Didn't you know better? Making dead souls walk
was not divine. It was a nasty trick, a slap
in the Elders' faces. This morning I woke, mouth
locked with blood; you will be crucified.

Born from the feather of a God, they say, but I
saw a face above me and they swear he's faceless.

When you were a youngster I saw you stone a bird
to death with the neighborhood boys. Tired
of the game, you blew the dust from its twisted
wing and fingered the severed bone. You wept
over that degraded body as no human could ever weep.
I thought the bird must fly from your hands.

But as a child you knew better, knew right from
wrong; you let what was dead remain that way.

THE CONQUISTADORES

The sand slips like snow through the fingers
of a Spanish army going home. In their helmets
the waves are reflected, breaking against their skulls.
They watch the restless ships chained like bulls
to the sea's floor. Small boats row out
to collect them. Men use their helmets to scoop off
layers of shells while the wind dries their hair,
crusted with sweat and hard weather. Others
rehearse first words for a mother, a brother,
a wife grown old. Each waits his turn
for a place in the row boat while every quarter
hour the whole army steps back

a few paces as the sea pushes their boots.
Some drop to their knees, beat the water with their fists.

From this point each of them will go on, though going on
from here can only mean going back—to a city,
perhaps Salamanca, the square burnt dry,
the windows high up flagged with laundry.
Or to a house in a field—the old stumps are still
in the yard, the fruit pits on the door step, the scraps
of wool under the bed. But after so many years
the quiet ones waiting inside are strange.

VALLEJO IN THE MINES OF QUIVILCA

The *Cholo* breaks out of the mountain rock, a man,
a hunk of stone, blasted, burned, a vein of metal,
a vein of blood pumping across his forehead like a fuse.
His right hand numb, though he still uses it on his wife.
The Company has gone too far, he says, turned us
into dogs and dogs won't dig ore the way a man should.
At home his wife presses the plates onto the table,
slowly, like printing a sign. There's a meeting tonight.
With a shovel she digs up the nail box under the porch.
It's my Uncle's gun, she says, as her husband runs the barrel
over his lips like a salve. This time his wife won't stay home.

As the men walk, their black and soggy lungs swing
like pendulums in their chests. And from way high up,
looking down, the Yankee God of the Tungsten mines
charts the miners' puny trails towards the campfires.

And the God sweats.