

Bounty
and
Twenty Poems to Read on the Streetcar

Senior Thesis

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by
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Bounty

*there is someone right now who is looking
to you, not Him, for whatever
love still exists.*

FRANZ WRIGHT

The Assassin

after Eliza Griswold

In the time it takes
to slam shut a door
and feel it then flung
open against you
he can change his face at will.

His body breathes
not a whisper
of menace, gun
slung over his shoulder
a guitar on its strap.

If I am shot
I am shot in the foot
with bullets so tiny
the wounds barely bleed.

I am not meant to die.
I am meant to see
and weep for what I've seen.
You asked and now you know
about my dreams.

Waiting for the Cross-Eyed Messengers

“I don’t want to hurt anyone”
is what people say
when they mean “I will not be capable

of lifting the anger
from your shoulders when it becomes
too heavy for you to bear”

The anger lasts as long
as the fog of your exhalations
on winter days, evaporates

like seawater if you leave it
where light can touch it, and instead
of salt grains leaves traces

of sadness, which do not weigh you down,
in fact are a cluster of small blue balloons
that float away from your body

and you’re left watching them brush
against your kitchen ceiling for days
before they deflate completely,

hovering above your head as
you wash the dishes, you don’t try
to reach up and catch their strings anymore,

even at one AM, when you’re still awake
like it’s some kind of protest, you just
sink your wrists in soapy water and scrub,

and wait for one of grace’s cross-eyed messengers
to track you down, limp over to you
on that one good leg, and plant a kiss

on your cheek, sloppy,
so when you wake up the next morning
you feel it still.

At the Breaking Point

I know the temptation
to pick a direction and walk,
tell no one, cry until
the capillaries burst in my nostrils,
make them find me hours later, huddled
and mute in the city park,
my front streaked with
mucus and blood.

Praise the fact that
I no longer expect the fruit of madness
to hold any solid pit of truth at its core.

The last time I tried to scream
the sound snagged on the
smoke-etched cracks in my throat
and came out thin and shrill,
the whine of begging hound.

I Cover My Head

for Rawda

When I saw you unwrap
your hijab I was
as an infant before
a dish of jewels
with no angel
to stop my hand.

Two years later,
I still feel
on my palms the oil
you used
to smooth back your curls.

From the Fossils

Many of us
realized
what was coming
but the world
never ceases
to be beautiful
as it is ending.

Algiers

for Dorian

You read that the FLN militants
were sufficiently desperate
for recognition to drive
through the streets shooting

and, when they ran out
of ammunition, to aim
their vehicle at a cluster
of civilians and motor them down.

That's how I deserve to die,
you say.
Like a martyr?
No. Like civilians.

Strange, when it comes
to my own worth
I have never needed evidence
greater than the way

you embraced me yesterday,
rushing to fold your arms
around me as I stepped
through the door, even though

you had seen me
just that morning, even though
you saw the grocery bags
anchoring my arms and knew
I could not hold you back.

When Sarah Apologizes for her Sadness

I have long
lacked the words
to tell her
that regardless
of the shunt
threaded
beneath the skin
of her neck,
regardless
of the scar
unfurling
along her scalp,
I have never
been anything
but grateful
to bask
in her light.

Prayer

Days
when the bread dough does not rise
and the jeweled parrots refuse
to light on my shoulders,
I wonder if it is all a test
and decide: No.

I have no faith to waste.
There is nothing here to prove.

Sharpness is simply
the most efficient lesson
in avoiding future injury

so let me say
to You
who I know are listening:
Gather your broken glass
and your cut diamonds.
Unsheathe your curved-edged words.
And let this
be done.

Traveler Dreams

I

I asked him to explain
the one word I hadn't understood.
He said "I'll show you. Touch my arm."
I touched his arm. He bit off my hand.

II

The judge doesn't speak English
and the witnesses don't speak Spanish
and I have to translate
my own defense.

III

When I stopped speaking my tongue began to shrivel in my mouth and eventually it fell out. I woke one morning and saw it lying on my pillow, gray and dry, and when I tried to pick it up it crumbled to dust in my hands. I brought my fingertips to my face and they carried no scent of earth or ash or flesh or rot; they smelled of nothing.

'Dumb' has two meanings for good reason, but I have found that the worst part of lacking language is not lacking wit. Nor identity. The worst is lacking use. When my brother wept, I could only cough. When my sister asked me for advice, I shook my head and kissed her cheek with dry lips.

This Heart of Mine

What to do?
The sucker's too big
to tranquilize.

Appetite

As if I had never proven
when it rears
I can shove a bit
between its teeth

I split my tongue
to keep from
calling out your name.

Poem with Heart Sutra

Praise the nameless prayers
that pierced their target.

I have loosed prayers that carried no name.

Praise the shadow of the palm
warming the body.

I have let my fingers trace the plush of car seats
instead of grasping shoulders that trembled.

Praise the tilt of head
patient as the skull beneath.

I have looked without sight at pellets
split between a capsule's two halves.

Praise the blankets
that harbor us until sunrise.

I have lifted back my bedclothes
without smoothing the heart-suture imprints.

After the Vigil

I wished for natural death —
who press buttons rather
than coax flame from spark —
when nothing natural is
instantaneous. The spirit

left to its own
does not cleave itself
neatly from flesh but surrenders
organ by organ, cell by cell
while its children caught
in the breath between
wait to exhale.

I See It In You

The pain rising as fluid

the faint warping
at the contours of your form

The ripples
expand and waver
on the surface of the pools
behind your eyes

when you speak

How heavy your tongue is,
waterlogged in your mouth

Death on Meeting Children

They are allowed
perhaps two scarless years.
Occasionally three,
no more than four
before their first
glimpse.

They're boldest
when they're alone.
They climb into my lap
and twist the corners of my cloak.
They ask about the scythe
and laugh at the syllables
ree ping sols
Inevitably they want
to touch it and I let them.

The Lovesick

Some would burn
themselves alive
to keep the cold
from nipping their fingers
again.

Good Intentions

after Rosario Castellanos

I filled my pockets with them,
as if with stones,

until I could not straighten
my spine enough
to raise my lips
to your face.

Dream with Flask

You shrank
till you could
slip in
through its mouth.
Its body
was of clear glass.
In broad
daylight
I pulled it
from below
my coat and
everyone hushed
when they saw
what I was drinking.

In Praise of Bad Sex

As a child
I splayed my fingers
over the keys of
the family piano, pleased
at whatever jangle
of tones I could
unleash, knowing
I was not making
music but I was
at least
making

In the Garden of the Psychiatric Hospital

I weeded shards of glass and used syringes
from the vegetable beds,
and the patients called me crazy
for going barefoot.

So Much Has Been Allowed to Me

for Becca

For example, with your body
more broken than I'd ever seen it

and half your limbs strapped
in soft cast or gauze, you let me

crawl up your staircase lugging
my tears and told

me to lift you
to the far side

of the bed so you
could hold me in your good arm.

Post-trauma

The choice is always crude.
The hammer in your fist.
Unrelenting grudge and
unrelenting forgiveness
scurry through the yard
like chipmunks,
chasing each other
and chattering, their chattering
keeps you wakeful
and delirious and you know
one of them has to go.

Second Dream with Knife

No reckoning
with muscle or bone
this time, the flesh
gave easily
as a plum and so
became one, ripe
slivers I lipped
from the blade's
edge as I sliced.

*I'm getting
better
at this, I thought
but then came
to his arms.*

Separation

There are combines for the job
but I blistered my palms
heaving the flail
over the bound sheaves of wheat.

Swapping the brute force
for machines
doesn't make the force less brutal.

If I didn't have the blisters
I'd have a bounty
greater than I need or want

ceaselessly compelling me
to try and gather it all in my arms.

I maintain: mine
is a body that wants to bow
to old cycles

After winnowing
I cropped my hair
ploughed the flesh
over my skeleton
let my hipbones
lie fallow.

Learning of Your Next Love

It has been years
since I left my childhood home,
but now I know it is burning
my lungs still fill
with phantom smoke.

Dzhokhar

We've spent the day indoors
together, he and I.
His face the
only face
on every screen.

The elementary rule
of slaughter: do not name
what you intend
to consume. When I pray
for the dead
I will see him.

Chanting Psalms on Shabbat during Lockdown

no skin rent

Hallelujah

no strange fires

Hallelujah

lemon bars

Hallelujah

the grass dry and living

Hallelujah

clean towels

Hallelujah

fingertips and guitar strings

Hallelujah

fingertips and knobs of spine

Hallelujah

Hallelujah my mother called and I answered

Hallelujah I have more shelter than spirit or flesh

Hallelujah Becca is coming to hold me
in both her good arms while I bless You
with the undiluted praise of tears.

Visiting Marcos

I can say *I beg your pardon,*
I regret, How sad this is,
But I do not know how to say:
Sorry.
I am sorry I am not her.

I have yet to study
another language that has
this particular capacity
for expressing real guilt
over something I did
not cause and would
not change if I could.

I say *Thank you*
and put my arms
around his shoulders
and hold him as we wait
beneath the streetlamp.

We the Living

A corpse at least can be neutralized
as the series of tasks it presents:

the washing, the blessing, the guiding
of limbs through the folds of the shroud
in a room with centuries of ritual for company.

Not so with the sleeping bodies
who pile the night with their slow breath.
The living can deny each other

everything, including the option to mourn,
making of grief something
to be wrung out a moment at a time

beyond other living eyes,
like my mother drafting eulogies
aloud to herself in the shower,

or I who write by flashlight
as if intruding in my own bed.

The Women of Ted Bundy

We were the nurses, the students,
the hitchhikers, the women
who flattened the cornfields
as we stomped forward
with our dictionaries
and hiking boots and steady thumbs.
To you, we are the girls
who should have run.
Our names are a few inky stamps
within his entry of the encyclopedia,
where there are no photographs
of our faces.
You read that he used
tire irons and crowbars,
oak branches and hacksaw blades,
that he ripped
the nipples off our breasts
left grooved dents
in our skulls.
You imagine we died begging,
the coarse yoke of regret
heavy across our shoulders,
piercing splinters into our necks
as it forced our heads to bow.
The pepper spray in your pockets
the keys you clutch
between your knuckles
comfort you as you walk
through streets after dark.
They make you believe
you are wiser than we.
You assume he stripped us
of our strength
as easily as he stripped
the clothing from our corpses,
but he was the one who couldn't lift
the stacks of books from his car.
His was the arm strapped in the sling,
his, the leg stiff in plaster.
And you think
we were victims
before we were dead.
We never saw him

tense his arms to bludgeon us.
We had our backs to him
as we gazed in the windows
of the VW to see what cargo
he was too weak to unload.
We believed ourselves
sturdy enough to bear
what he could not,
even as our backs
crumpled like dry leaves.

Water Damage

after S.A. Stepanek

I weep
for I shouldn't want to know
if I count among the humble.

I weep
for the jaws in me
devour.

I weep
for love falls as rainwater
upon my oilslick skin.

I weep
for the tongue
thirsts for blood and will have it.

I weep
for the grapes
in the freezer.

I weep
for the shock of cold necessary
to untrigger the body.

I weep
for nonsense
for no word remains meaningless.

I weep
for the language
which seasoned and sealed the bowl of my ear.

I weep
for the apologies
chosen over blessings.

I am no god.
Trespass in my reservoir of tears
and I cannot help but overflow.

**As If Threats Could Travel Quicker Than Prayers
Or
After They Say You've Gone Missing**
for Max

You son of a bitch, if you get yourself killed
I will not be writing your eulogy.

You pierced martyr of the motel room
You gazeless Christ whose ghosts
haunt the subways,

What art do you imagine will rise as a dust cloud
from your skin when you pound fist
against chest in your grief,

How do you presume
to glide across these waters without leaving
a single ripple in your wake?

Poems from July

1

for PJ

Now we know –
how foolish
to lay down a love
like a musket
surrendered
at the enemy's gate
and expect
to walk out
at the end
unscathed,
to find it
where we left it
in the grass.

2

for Louis

Shame of the meteor that slams into earth,
only to look upon a landscape
coated in ash, and everyone fleeing.

Shame of remaining
when you believe
you scorch the ground
where you stand.

Shame that I let you
rename the streets of my brain
after I saw what you had done
with yours.

Shame of the skull
spanned by the fingers.

Shame of the prayers I aimed at a God
you had named your enemy.

Shame of the dream
where you were so happy
to see me yet refused
to speak to me

in English.

Shame that I presumed
there would be more time
to learn your language.

3

I am making a truce with my demons.
They will stop returning to haunt me
if I will stop pacing outside the mouth of hell
and howling their names.

4

The sun is out for the first time in days.
The breeze coming in through the window screen
is exactly the temperature of the air inside the kitchen.
I will slice the last of the mangoes;
it is as ripe as it will ever be.
I will suck every bit of flesh from the pit
as small bristles pierce the corners of my mouth.

Old News

Old news the stories of pelvic fracture,
the boys I watched
eat their own minds
with mania,
the months I couldn't speak
to my brother or my sister,
the compulsions we've inherited
and divvied among us –

*I heal and heal
and always look for
more broken bodies,
you count every drop
of toxic water,
you take on the wind
with your breath
and try to blow away
the blood-clouds looming –*

It will surprise no one
to learn I have mastered the art
of rending scar tissue
to reach that coveted ink.

Now angel, please
stay this hand
with its dirty fingernails.

I want no elegies
above my own love poems.

The Illness

What a boon we thought it,
when the wings first sprouted
from your shoulder blades,
before the bowing of your spine
and the shrunken limbs,
before your nostrils sealed
as nose and jaw sharpened
to rostrum and we realized
you were never intended
to become the angel among us.

For My Siblings

From the world
to come
even
I followed you.

Poem with Teeth

You miserly poet.

Shoving your hands
into jars
of other people's grief.

Keeping what is yours
to tell
hoarded
like baby teeth
in jewelry cases.

Response to an Interruption

Would you be so kind
as to allow us some privacy,
my skeleton and me,
and if you might accept
a token of unsolicited advice
it will in the future
behoove you to knock
before barging in
on such interrogations.

Dream with Ladder

When I saw
it led nowhere
I told you
we had to climb down.
You didn't believe
we could
and let yourself
go limp
and with my feet
balanced
on the highest rungs
I lunged
to fuse
my arms
around your chest,
to keep you
from falling
from where
you had followed me.

You the Fruit

After our bedposts catch flame
they will find me
with my limbs still curled
over your imprint in the mattress,
my gaze untethered,
my breath reeking of lotus.

Poem with Keyhole

I cannot measure
how long I kept
my eye pressed
to the keyhole
outside the room
of God's compassion,
even after I realized
I had never touched
the knob, had
only assumed
the door
would be locked.

Acknowledgments

Though I started writing the poems that appear here two years ago, *Bounty* was a project twenty-one years in the making. More people than I could plausibly name have somehow facilitated my writing of poetry in that time. In respect for the attention of whoever might read this page, I have made an attempt to corral my gratitude. But, dazzled as I am before my trove of blessings, this attempt was feeble.

Thanks, in somewhat chronological order, to Dad for reading poetry to me at bedtime, to Mom for reading poetry to me in the morning, to Ruhi for gifting me *The Gift*, to Kaylyn for reading books of poetry cover-to-cover, for keeping a notebook, and for telling me to keep paper by my bed, to Mom and Dad for reading without startling me with impossible praise, to PJ for encouraging me to take risks, to Melanie Braverman for teaching me and for startling me with possible praise, to Matan for reading, to Matan for writing to me, to Matan for the tip about mugwort, to Matan for his unconditional faith, to Max for reading, to Kori for reading, to Ash for going to readings with me, to Becca for reading, to Becca for praying with and for me, to Melanie S. for reading, to Melanie S. for her unconditional faith, to Amy for reading, to Amy for praying with and for me, to Ari for befriending me before I had words, to Ruhi for praying with and for me, to Ruhi for reading, to Mom and Dad for reading, to Laura Quinney for reading, to Olga for reading, to Olga for teaching me, to Olga for startling me with possible and impossible praise, to Olga for her unconditional faith, to Mom and Dad for all that is unconditional.

To these, and to others unnamed who have taught me, trusted me, prayed with or for me, loved me, and listened to me: My ink and my breath are limited; my gratitude is not.

Brandeis University, May 2013

Twenty Poems to Read on the Streetcar

Oliverio Girondo

Translated by Shira Rubenstein

*No prejudice more ridiculous
than
the prejudice of the SUBLIME.*

For “La Púa”

*Fraternal cenacle, with the luxurious certainty that we, in our quality as Latin
Americans, possess the world’s best stomach, a stomach both eclectic and
liberated, able to digest, and digest well, as easily a northern herring or eastern
couscous as a flame-cooked sandpiper or one of those epic chorizos of Castile.*

OLIVERIO

Open Letter¹ to “La Púa”

Señor Don Evar Mendez.

Dear Evar: A book – above all a book of poems – should justify itself, without prologues that might defend or explain it.

You insist, however, upon the necessity that one be included in the present edition. I elude and condescend your request, attaching the letter I sent to “La Púa” from Paris, a letter whose ingenious skepticism might now provoke some smiles but which has, at least, the advantage of having been written contemporary to the publication of my 20 poems.

*Warmly,
O.G.*

You ask so much! At times the nerves set to humming...one loses the courage to continue without doing nothing...Oh, the weariness of never wearying! And one finds rhythms descending the staircase, poems tossed in the middle of the street, poems that one gathers like cigarette butts on the sidewalk.

What happens then is uncanny. Pastime becomes occupation. We feel the modesty of pregnancy. We blush if anybody looks at us head-on. And – even more terrible – without realizing it, the occupation ends up interesting us, and it’s useless to tell ourselves: “I don’t want to opt, because to opt is to ossify. I don’t want to have a stance because all stances are stupid...including not to have one...”

Irreparably we end up writing: *Twenty Poems to Read on the Streetcar.*

Voluptuousness of humbling ourselves before our own eyes? Endearment with what we scorned? I don’t know. The fact is that instead of deciding its cremation, we condescend to bury the manuscript in one of our desk drawers, until a choice day, one we least could have predicted, when it begins to interrogate us through the keyhole.

Would an eventual success be able to convince us of our mediocrity? Could we have a dose of stupidity sufficient to make us admired?...Until, to the insinuation of some friend, one answers: “Why publish? None of you need it to respect me, and as for the rest...” but as the friend turns out to be apocalyptic and inexorable, he responds: “Because it’s necessary to declare it as you have declared war on the tailcoat, which in our country has carried to all parts, on the tailcoat with which they write in Spain, when they’re not writing with neck ruffs, cassocks, or in shirtsleeves. Because it’s crucial to have faith, as you have faith, in our phonetics, from the moment we were ourselves, Americans, who have oxygenated Spanish, making it a breathable language, a language that can wear itself as quotidian, and write itself as ‘American,’ with our own brand of everyday American...” And I blush a little to think that I might have faith in our phonetics

¹ Buenos Aires, August 31, 1925

and that our phonetics might be so rude as to be right all the time...and I'm left thinking of our homeland, which has the impartiality of a hotel room, and I blush a little to confirm how difficult it is to get attached to hotel rooms...

Publish? Publish when even the best publish 1,071% more than they ought to publish?...I do not have, nor do I wish to have, the blood of a statue. I do not intend to suffer humiliation from sparrows. I don't aspire to a tomb drooled over with platitudes, since really the only thing of interest is the mechanism of feeling and thinking. Proof of existence!

The quotidian, though – is that not an admirable and modest manifestation of the absurd? And to cut logical ties, doesn't it imply the only true possibility of adventure? Why not be childish, since we feel weary of repeating the same gestures of those who've been underground for 70 centuries? And what would be the reason not to admit any probability of rejuvenation? Couldn't we attribute to it, for example, all the responsibilities of a perfect and omniscient fetish, and have faith in prayer or in blasphemy, in the rumor of a paradisiacal boredom or the voluptuousness of self-condemnation? What would prevent us from wearing virtue or vice as if they were clean clothes, agreeing that love is not a narcotic for the exclusive use of imbeciles, and so being able to move alongside happiness, pretending our distraction?

I, at least, in my sympathy for the contradictory – synonymous with life – renounce not even my right to renounce, and I toss my *Twenty Poems* like a stone, smiling before the uselessness of my gesture.

OLIVERIO GIRONDO
Paris, December 1922

Landscape in Brittany

Douarnenez,
with a toss of its cup,
swamps
between its dice houses,
a piece of sea
with an odor of sex that suffocates.

Wounded boats, beached, with their wings folded!
Taverns that sing with the voice of orangutans!

Along the wharves,
mercury-slick from the fishing,
sailors who grip each other by the arms
to learn to walk
and go crashing
with the waves
against the walls;
saltwater women,
iodined,
with aquatic eyes, and curls of seaweed,
who inspect the nets hanging from the roofs
like wedding veils.

The bell tower of the church,
it's a conjuror's sleight-of-hand,
pulling from its bell
a flock of pigeons.

Meanwhile the grannies,
with their nightcaps,
enter the church nave
so they can swill back their prayers
and so the silence might
for one instant stop gnawing
at the stone nostrils of the saints.

Douarnenez, July 1920

Cabaret

The notes from the brass slides trace rocket trajectories, waver in the air, dissipate before they crash to the ground.

Enter a pair of swampy eyes, foul-smelling, teeth rotted by the sweetness of romances, legs that steam the stage.

The gaze of the public is more dense and has more calories than ever, is a corrosive gaze that pierces leotards and turns the flesh of the artists to parchment.

There's a group of sailors dazzled by the beacon that a *maquereau* holds on his smallest finger, a reunion of prostitutes with a drift of night air from the port, a Brit manufacturing fog with his pupils and pipe.

The waitress brings me her half-naked breasts on a tray...breasts that I would take with me to warm my feet when I go to bed.

The curtain, closing, plays the part of a curtain half-open.

Brest, August 1920

Sketch in the Sand

The morning lounges on the beach powdered with sun.

Arms.

Amputated legs.

Body parts reintegrating.

Floating heads of rubber.

Lathing the bodies to sea-bathers, the waves stretch their filings over the sawdust of the beach.

Everything is gold and blue!

The awnings' shade. The eyes of the girls injecting themselves with novels and horizons. My joy, shod with rubber soles, making me bounce over the sand.

For eighty centavos, photographers sell the bodies of the bathing women.

There are kiosks that exploit the dramatics of the breaker. Servants clucking. Soda water irascible with essence of sea. Rocks with the algal chests of sailors and painted hearts of swordsmen. Bands of seagulls feigning the shattered flight of a blank piece of paper.

And before all, the sea!

The sea!...rhythm of digressions. The sea! with its drool and with its epilepsy.

The sea!...until shouting

¡BASTA!

as at the circus.

Mar del Plata, October, 1920

Nocturne

Cool of the glass pane as forehead rests against the window. Haggard lights which leave us even lonelier when they wink out. Spider web the wires weave over the roofs. Hollow trot of nags who pass and stir us without reason.

What does the howling of the cats in heat call to mind, and what is the intention of the papers dragging through empty patios?

Hour the old furniture employs to shake itself of lies, when the pipes hold strangled cries, as if asphyxiating in the walls.

Sometimes we think, switching the knob of electricity, of the horror the shadows must feel, and we almost want to warn them so they have time to curl up in the corners. And sometimes the crosses of the telephone poles over the roofs have something sinister to them, and we almost want to brush against the walls, like a cat or a thief.

Nights we might wish a hand to pass along our backs, and when we swiftly understand there is no tenderness comparable to that of caressing something that sleeps.

Silence! – unvoiced cricket that sets in our ear – song of faucets badly closed! – the only cricket that favors the city.

Buenos Aires, November 1921

Rio de Janeiro

The city imitates, in cardboard, a city of porphyry.

Caravans of mountains camp at the outskirts.

There's enough Sugarloaf to coat the whole bay in syrup...Sugarloaf and its cable car, which will lose its balance for not using a paper parasol.

Faces caked with paint, the buildings leap atop one another and once up offer their backs to let the palm trees swipe them with feather dusters on the roof.

The sun tenderizes the asphalt and the women's rumps, ripens the pears of electricity, suffers a twilight in the opal buttons the men use even to fasten their trousers.

Seven times a day, they hose the streets with jasmine water!

There are pederastic old trees, blossoming with teacup roses, old trees that swallow the boys playing at bow-at-arrows in the promenade. Fruits that, falling, leave huge pocks in the sidewalk; blacks with tobacco dermis, palms made of coral, and cheeky watermelon smiles.

Only four hundred thousand reals gets you a cup of coffee that perfumes a whole neighborhood in ten minutes.

Rio de Janeiro, November 1920

Note on a Street Scene

In the terrace of a café there is a grey family. Passing by, some cross-eyed breasts looking for a smile above the tabletops. The roar of automobiles fades the leaves of the trees. On a fifth-story balcony, someone crucifies himself thrusting the shutters open.

I wonder where I will keep the kiosks, the streetlamps, the passersby, streaming in through my pupils. I feel so full I'm afraid of bursting...I will need to leave some ballast on the sidewalk.

Arriving at a corner, my shadow breaks away from me to fling itself between the wheels of a streetcar.

Milonga

On the tables, decapitated champagne bottles in clown white ties, nickel buckets reflecting slenderized arms and shoulders of *coquettes*.

The *bandoneón* sings with the yawns of a slimy worm, contradicts the carpet's red hair, magnetizes nipples, pelvises, and shoe tips.

Males break themselves in a ritual cut, head sunk between shoulders, face swollen with filthy words.

Females with nervous haunches, a skim of froth at the armpits, and eyes too oiled.

Suddenly, the sound of crystal failing. The tables buck and peg four kicks against the air. An enormous mirror crumples with the columns and people inside; while through a swell of arms and backs the blows burst like a wheel of flare rockets.

Together with the watchman, the dawn enters dressed in violet.

Buenos Aires, October 1921

Venice

One breathes a breeze of postal card.

Terraces! Gondolas with sway of hips. Facades that reintegrate Persian tapestries in the water. Oars that never finish weeping.

A silence gargles at thresholds, arpeggioes a *pizzicato* on moorings, gnaws at the mystery of shuttered houses.

Passing beneath the bridges, one takes the opportunity to blush.

Rowing in the lagoon, dandies who wear a pocket lachrymal with all the canal's iridescences, women who have brought their lips from Vienna and Berlin to savor meat the color of olives, and women who feed only on rose petals, whose hands are encrusted with serpent eyes and who jut the fatal jawbone of d'Annunzian heroines.

When the sun sets fire to the city, donning Nero's soul is required.

In the *piccoli canali*, gondoliers fornicate with the night, announcing their spasms with plaintive song, while the moon, as anywhere, fattens her chubby doorman face.

I doubt that even in this city of sensualism there exist phalli more striking or of a hastier erection than that of the clappers in St. Mark's Campanile.

Venice, July 1921

Ex-voto

for the girls of Flores

The girls of Flores have eyes sweet as the candied almonds of the *Confitería del Molino*, wear silk bows that sip their buttocks in a flutter of butterfly wings.

The girls of Flores stroll with arms linked, transmitting their shudders back and forth, and if anyone looks them in the pupils they clench their thighs in fear of dropping their sex on the sidewalk.

At dusk, they hang their unripe chests from the iron branches of the balconies, to turn their dresses purple at the feel of their nakedness, and at night, towed by their mothers – adorned as frigates – they troop through the plaza to let men ejaculate words at their ears, their phosphorescent nipples blinking on and off like fireflies.

The girls of Flores live in dread of their haunches rotting like apples left to spoil, and the men's desire smothers them so much they sometimes want to shed it like a corset, since they lack the courage to slice their bodies to scraps to cast at all who pass them on the sidewalk.

Buenos Aires, October 1920

Festival in Dakar

The street, smelling of desert, winds through a black frieze of men seated the curb.

Opposite the Government Palace:
Heat. Heat.

Europeans sporting spittoons on their heads.
Blacks trimmed with the affect of a sultan.

The *candombe* drums roil the women's udders so the passing chancellor might milk from them a cup of cocoa.

Callus-killing plants! Dark women dressed as parrots, their brood tucked in a pleat of their skirts. Palm trees which by night stretch to brush the dust from the pupils of stars.

There will be rockets! Cannon blasts! A new tax on the natives.
Discourse in four thousand dark tongues.

And by night:

ILUMINATION!
courtesy of the constellations.

Sketch in Seville

The sun sets violet crescents beneath the eyes of the eaves, makes parchment the epidermis of the shirts hanging as if from a noose in the middle of the street.

Windows breathing with the lips of women!

Passing by, dogs with dancer hips. Pimps with trousers polished to a bitumen luster. Shabby horses who on Sunday will drag their guts through the plaza of bulls.

The patios churn out citrus blossoms and romance!

A cape pinned to iron lattices tenses like a bat. A Zurbaran priest sells a chasuble stolen in the sacristy to an antiquarian. Excessive eyes blister at a glance.

The women's pores are open as suction pads, their temperature seven degrees higher than average.

Seville, March 1920

Corso Parade

The marching band cracks its spine
to keep it turning
chloroformed beneath eye masks
with its smell of water balloon and sweat
and its false voice
and its shipwreck farewells
and its rumpled tresses of paper strips
the trees comb in passing
alongside the curb
where the crowds
throw tiny life preservers in every color
while the girls
take their breasts from their dressing gowns
to toss at the floats
that spiritualize
in a sigh of paper silk
their weariness of longing to be happy
which is barely strong enough to reach
as high as the filaments of the light bulbs.

Mar del Plata, February 1921

Biarritz

The casino sips the last drops of twilight.

Voiceless automobiles. Shop windows constellated with false stars.
Women who will lose their smiles in a game of baccarat.

Faces drained of color by the gambling table, the croupiers officiate,
cross-eyed from seeing so much money change hands.

Pupils that liquefy turning the cards!
Pearl necklaces sinking their teeth into throats!

Beardless ephebes whose trousers open at the back. Men sporting
porcelain bibs. A fellow with a neck that will end up strangling him. A pair of
breasts that will spring from a décolletage between two moments to bowl over
everything like two enormous billiards.

When the door opens a crack, in comes a slice of the foxtrot.

Biarritz, October 1920

Nocturne II

Moon like the luminous face of a city hall clock.

Streetlamps wasted with jaundice! Streetlamps with apache caps, smoking a cigarette at each corner.

The humble, the humiliated song of urinals weary of singing! And silence of stars above humid asphalt.

Why might we sometimes feel as sad as a pair of stockings tossed to a corner? And why take such interest in the game of catch the echo of our steps plays against the wall?

Nights when we cloak ourselves beneath tree shadows for fear the houses might suddenly wake to see us pass, when the only comfort is the faith that our bed waits with its sails stretched for a better country.

Paris, July 1921

Pedestrian

Down the street, a public building inhales the stench of the city.

Shadows crack their spines across thresholds and lie down to fornicate on the sidewalk.

One armed pinned to the wall, a winked-out streetlamp holds the convex vision of people passing in automobiles.

The gazes of passersby smudge the shop window displays, slenderize the legs stretched under the hoods of Victorias.

Beside the curb a kiosk has just swallowed a woman whole.

Passing: an Englishwoman identical to a streetlamp. A trolley that is a school on wheels. A failure of a dog with prostitute eyes which shame us to see it and let it go past.¹

Suddenly, the corner watchman halts every shudder in the city with one stroke of his baton to hear in a single murmur the murmur of all the breasts brushing together.

¹ The failed dogs have lost their owners for lifting their leg like a mandolin, their hide is sizes too large for them, their voice without melody, alcoholic, and they manage to stretch themselves over stoops, to get swept away with the garbage.

Chioggia

Among a forest of masts,
its docks adorned with clotheslines,
Chioggia
drops anchor in the lagoon,
blood-slick with twilight
and latin-rigs.

Nets stretched over moss-grown, ungroomed streets!
Air caulking our lungs, leaving us with the taste of tar.

While women
drain their pupils
knitting doilies of mist,
boys dive
from bridge humps
into the litter of the canal.

Sailors with epidermis like dried figs, and hooks for toes!
Sailors in doorways mending sailcloth to cinch about the waist like a sumptuous
petticoat fragrant with seawater.
At dusk, the scent of fritters engorges bellies as wooden clogs start to sing...

And by night the moon, dissolving in the canal, disguises itself as a school of
silver fish swarming a bait.

Venice, July 1921

Plaza

Trees filter the city's hum.

Paths redden at the flowerbeds' chubby advances. Idylls explain all culinary negligence. Men so anesthetized by the sun that no one knows if they've died.

The life is urbane here, and simple.

The sole complications:

One of those men with wax-figure mustaches, mad for the wet nurses, milks from them everything they've earned with their udders.

The guard with his pump, a *Manneken-Pis*.

A lady making semaphore gestures at the watchman as she feels her twins strangling each other inside her belly.

Buenos Aires, December 1920

Lake Maggiore

When asking for the ticket, one must project the voice.

ISOLA BELLA! ISOLA BELLA!

Isola Bella, you have just the grandeur to look good on the canvas the English girls paint.

Isola Bella, with your palace, even with the motto of the crest on your porphyry doors:

HUMILITAS

Halls! Halls with tempestuous coffered ceilings where four hundred caryatids bite their thumbs at one another amidst a flock of cherubs.

HUMILITAS

Alcoves of topaz beds exacting from whoever reclines there a minimum of one bird-of-paradise plume gracing their backside.

HUMILITAS

Gardens spill a cascade of terraces to the lake as peacocks spread white lace parasols to block the sun or sweep, with ruby-, sapphire-encrusted brooms, the paths blood-spattered with crushed poppies.

HUMILITAS

Gardens where docents polish leaves, that we might, as we pass, adjust our ties, and where – before the nudity of Venuses populating the groves – the camphor laurels toast us with their branches.

ISOLA BELLA!...

Isola Bella, you are doubtlessly the prettiest landscape on the canvas painted by the English girls.

Isola Bella, with your palace, even with the motto of the crest on your porphyry doors:

HUMILITAS

Pallanza, April 1922

Of Seville

In the atrium: a gathering of blind men, authentic ones, placard and all. A pack of youngsters bark after a stray dog.

The church rests on ice to keep eyes and arms from melting...off the votive offerings.

Beneath stiff cloaks, virgins wipe away ruby tears. Some have horsetails strapped to their scalp. Others use their heart as a pincushion.

A bullring of keys injects the penumbra with a heavy dose of sacristy scent. Crossing herself, an old woman resurrects the ancestral orangutan within her.

Meanwhile, women facing the high alter liquefy their sex contemplating a crucifix that bleeds from seventy-six ribs. The priest chews prayer like a piece of bubblegum.

Seville, April 1920

Verona

They're celebrating Mary's adultery with the Holy Dove.

A pulverized rain buffs the Plaza of Vegetables, swelling to tiny balloons that sail over the sidewalk and burst for no apparent reason.

A dense crowd kneads its disillusion between the arches' fingers; while the band groans a waltz so the standard-bearers twirl four times and halt.

The Virgin, seated on a fountain as if over a bidet, spills water stained red by the colored lights inserted at her feet.

Guitars! Mandolins! Balconies without ladders or Juliets. Umbrellas that sweat and are like the survival of a flora already fossil. Columns on whose crowns monkeys amuse themselves in their ninth century of lovemaking.

The sky is simple, dusty, tinged green – same as the uniform of the soldiers.

Verona, July 1921

Translator's Notes

Plenty of scholars can do a far superior job than I of appraising Girondo's style, his work, his legacy. Thus I hesitate to make any broad statements in that vein. I will say that what drew me to this collection in particular was what I perceived to be a playfulness in the poetry, which I take as an indication of resistance to complacency on the part of the poet, as well as an ability to be present and amazed.

In *Twenty Poems to Read on the Streetcar*, Girondo is unwaveringly faithful to his own perception of any given moment, at the cost of all decorum. Certain poems are shocking in what would now be deemed insensitivity at best and at worse, outright racism – at times with a strong dose of sexism thrown in. Yet there is nothing mean-spirited about them. The poems above all convey amazement at what they witness, at the sheer quantity and diversity of human experience. Because of this, and because of the qualities mentioned above, the collection was a delight to translate.

During the process of translation I consulted with Fernando Rosenberg, Associate Professor of Hispanic Studies and Comparative Literature and Brandeis University, and with Olga Broumas, Professor of Creative Writing and an experienced translator of poetry. I can only hope my translations justly honor their incredible generosity of time and knowledge.

Brandeis University, May 2013

For the purposes of clarification I include as well a few notes on individual pieces:

“La Púa,” mentioned in Girondo's dedication, and in his open letter which serves as introduction (p.7), most likely refers to Carlos de la Púa, an Argentine poet and journalist contemporary to Girondo.

Milonga (title, p.15) could refer either to a genre of music or dance or to a place where tango is danced. Most commonly it is used as the latter.

Corso (in “Corso Parade,” p.20) is a word with to my knowledge no exact English equivalent, referring in particular to a parade held during Carnival. The Spanish title of the poem is simply “*Corso*.” I chose to retain the Spanish word as modifier to distinguish the parade.

Mannekin-Pis (in “Plaza,” p.25) is a well-known fountain sculpture in Brussels, depicting a naked boy urinating into the fountain's basin.