

## Dear Spanish

For kicking you in the shin in kindergarten  
this is what I get: how to say good-bye  
to my grandfather on the telephone

an hour before a plane shuttles him to Chile.  
Ninety-seven and two heart attacks, wanting  
only to live out his days on the brown soil

of familiar terrain. Your lingo blooms  
on his tongue. My tongue hobbles  
around my mouth, dragging its bag of English.

Bless my voice so it knows more than  
*estoy muy triste* and *ciao abuelito*. Bless it  
so I could touch him in your language

and erase the seven flat states that keep me  
from seeing once more the butterscotch  
of his face. Now the static of a bad connection,

my tongue leaning on a tooth. Bless it before  
the sky pulls him south, before we hang up.  
We hang up. The empty kitchen hums

with the soundtrack of my blood running  
in my ears, a language built on silence  
where every word is swallowed instead of said.

## Between Two Languages

*Misericordia* translates to mercy,  
as in God have mercy on our souls.  
*Ten piedad*, pity us the poor and suffering,  
the lost and broken. Have mercy. *Ten piedad*.  
*Misericordia*, a compassionate  
forgiveness, carries within  
*miseria*, misery, the stifled cry  
on a midnight bus to nowhere,  
and yes, the hunger, a starless night's  
piercing howl, the shadows within shadows  
under a freeway overpass, the rage  
that God might be laughing, or even  
worse, silent, gone, a passing hallucination.  
Our nerve-wracked bodies tremble.  
Our eyes have trouble peering into night.  
Let us hope for more than can possibly be.  
*Señor, ten misericordia de nosotros*.  
And if we are made in the image of God,  
then we can begin heading toward  
the ultimate zero, the void  
that is not empty, forgive ourselves,  
and remember the three  
seconds when we caught a glimpse  
of someone else's stifling cry.  
Compassion, then *miseria*, our own  
misery intensified by the discordant  
ringing of some other life. Our ultimate  
separation. Our bodies intolerably  
unable to halt the cacophonous  
clamor of unanswered prayers.  
But nevertheless we must try  
for no reason at all. Once more,  
*Señor, ten misericordia de nosotros*,  
forgive us for what we cannot do.



POETRY FOUNDATION

---

## Dream Song #16

BY DANIEL BORZUTZKY

*Hay golpes en la vida, tan fuertes ... Yo no sé!*

— César Vallejo

They sniffed us out of the holes with the animals  
they had programmed and there are blows in life so  
powerful we just don't know and there were trenches  
and there was water and it poured in through our mouths

and out of our ears and there were things we saw in the  
sand at that moment of sinking; mountains and daisies  
and tulips and rivers and the bodies of the people we  
had been and the bodies of the people we had loved

and we felt hooks coming through the trenches and we  
felt hooks coming through the sand and I saw hooks coming  
through my child's clothes and I wanted him to know that they  
would never be able to scoop us out of the sand but of course

it wasn't true they had scooped us out of the sand and our  
mouths were so full of dirt it is what they do when you're  
dead and they made us spit and they beat us until our mouths  
were empty and they paid us for constructing the mountain and

it was me and L and we looked for S and we looked for J and J  
and we looked for O and we looked for R and we looked for J  
and S in the holes in which the bodies of those we loved were  
hiding or dying or sinking or stealing some shelter some little

worm's worth of cover to keep their bodies from dissolving  
into the maniac murmurs of this impossible carcass economy



NÚMERO ACTUAL

ACERVO

COLABORADORES

BLOGS



SUSCRIBIRME

# On Seeing a Photograph of My Grandmother, Estela, Whom I Never Met

*Orígenes / CRÍTICA / Febrero de 2019*

*Robin Myers*

En Español

After Coahuila, Del Rio, San Antonio, Chicago, and Janesville, Wisconsin,

after the revolution and its quicksand borders and her father smoldering in the shuffle,

after his long, starched-collar tenure at the Parker Pen Company, wordlessly

reading the newspaper every day, a hand drifting out behind it to feel for the bowl

of little peppers beside him, after the sister and brothers born in succession,

some with names that changed language on the tongue, some that swelled into

their English edges like a screen door in summer, after the skirts and scarves

and hats and tiny violins they were instructed to play for the neighbors, none

of whom looked very much like any of them, when they came to call,

after college, which she left for, alone and against orders — after, as people say

when young women do such things, she “ran away from home”— after

her Egyptian lover and the horror of both her parents and his, after the war,

after my grandfather, a tall, grinning, ruddy-haired philosopher, was sent

on a ship to the middle of an ocean teeming with metal, and after a ferocious

bout of chicken pox that could have killed him but actually plucked him out

of what slaughtered the others in whose company he’d gone, after one

dead brother and then another, the one who’d wanted to die, and before

her sons, three of them —four, counting the one who lived for just a few days

after he was born: Bruce— my father the second, before the

house in Denver

with the garden in back, before the dogs whose faces she’d take in her hands

to lovingly insult in the language her parents had stopped speaking to everyone

but each other, before the two years in Lima, before she let her children

stop going to the steely Catholic school where their palms had smarted,

before my father and his brother flung, in the most resplendent gesture of triumph

a childhood could possibly grant, their textbooks off a cliff and into the sea,

before the house she and my grandfather had longed to build in the Michoacán town

with a name like a swing—*Er-on-ga-rí-cua-ro*—and never did, before his

stopped heart, before my father's stricken years as a hospital orderly,

biking delirious in the snow to his writing workshops after the night shift,

before the other war, my father's three drafts, each time reprieved by this

scale or that one, before he saw my mother in an airport, before New York

and the suburbs and me and my brother and everywhere that's grown us up,

before Mexico opened itself to her again at last, but not as she'd imagined,

going it alone, renting an old house in a city with low clouds and dark stairs

clambering up and down from the lake —a larger city now, tumefied

with traffic along its skinny streets, land ravaged in ways that would have

pierced her had she lived to know— before the letters she'd write to my father

in her two tongues, and before I stood on the steps of the Xalapa cathedral,

not knowing whether she would have ever gone in —I have not—

but suspecting that she would, at least, have stood here too,

my grandmother —twenty-seven, twenty-eight, maybe thirty  
—

dances by herself in a white dress, soft-armed, barefoot,

her skirts sweeping up around her in the gust of her grace,

her dark face tilted toward the camera but not looking into it,

smiling a little, as if quietly astonishing herself,

as if she knew she had something beautiful inside her

that had lived there all along

and had decided,

right at that very moment,

with her help,

to speak.

---

**Imagen de portada:** Louise Bourgeois, de la serie *À l'Infini*, 2008. © 2017 The Easton Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, Nueva York

---

#POESÍA

#ESTADOS UNIDOS

#FAMILIA

#MIGRACIÓN

NOSOTROS

[¿Quiénes somos?](#)

[Contacto](#)

[Directorio](#)

ENLACES EXTERNOS

[Encuéntranos en librerías](#)

[Sitios amigos](#)



PARTICIPACIÓN

[Colaborar en la revista](#)

[Convocatorias](#)

MÁS  
INFORMACIÓN

[Privacidad](#)

we might smuggle  
each other

past all regret.  
And we are only

one foot into the other's  
long walk home.

Which direction  
to take:

forward or forfeit?

### Migration

In sleep, two unlikely  
countries bordering

Bodies vigilant  
to attack: at times

Axis, at times  
Ally. Tonight we

lie awake, one hand  
on each other's

gate. How far  
to open it, how far

to slip through.  
What casualty

will this bed  
bring. Our chests idle

their tired patrol.  
In confusion

### Class

It's not work  
just because  
you can get it

It's the luck  
of the hem  
and the heel

a perfectly turned  
drinking clause  
made readable

What others call  
internal dialogue  
my dad would have called

brandy  
It's not work  
if you can spell

it. A union line  
hemmed against  
cold weather

gives Poles  
and Spaniards  
little to talk about:

pre-printed placards  
struggle to rhyme  
equality with anything

and Jersey  
keeps me rubbernecking  
like free verse

can cure  
some poor fuck's  
lung cancer

today, students  
are working out  
class schedules

so I propose  
a course objective  
of carrying paint drums

across the length  
of my office  
until someone gives

### Our Language

When I sigh  
I am breathing you  
back out of me.  
Like smoke you pause,  
then melt into air.  
You are often this intangible,  
the silent *e* of love  
or *hache* of hábito.

Háblame, you say,  
yet my next breath  
draws you in with the air  
hissing past teeth  
because I do not know  
where I want you  
or what awkward syntax  
I'll leave twisted  
in the whispering sheets.

The hush of your hands  
reaches me from every shadow.  
You kiss the slats of skin open  
to the striped dawn  
of the window blind.  
You kiss these warm *l*'s  
of light and depart.

In the caesura between hours and days,  
weeks, I stroke watercolors.  
The blue sinks deep  
as the resonant pitch  
of your vocal chords,  
an anaphora of waves  
lapping to the shore  
until the paper is satiated.  
I am not.

We work in English,  
make love in Spanish,  
and code-switch past our indecision.  
On days filled with your absence,  
I think in *sinalefás*  
and trace you in the ring left  
by my morning coffee cup.  
If only I could touch  
the amber circles of your eyes,  
kiss your liquid pupils  
when they dilate, enticed.  
Then I'd be inside of you  
as you so easily  
fall into me.

I'd feel the constriction  
of an *x* we cannot name,  
the multilingual moan of *o's*,  
tense Spanish vowels  
awaiting release.  
Then the loose  
twirling of an *erre*  
down our spines,  
down the soft sides of our arms,  
líquidas vibrantes  
of our blood.  
This is how I want you—  
at once within  
and without

like a breath,  
a sigh,  
a language.

### Song

You shout my name  
from beyond my dreams,  
beyond the picture window  
of this Rosarito beach house.  
Rushing from bed to shore  
I glimpse their backs—  
volcanoes rising out of the sea.  
Your back, a blue-black silhouette,  
feet wet with the wash of morning waves.  
Fountains spring from mammal minds,  
my hands lifting a splash of sand.  
I'm on my knees,  
toes finding a cool prayer  
beneath them, fingers pressing  
sea foam to my temples,  
while you open arms wide as a generation,  
raise them to a compass point,  
dive.  
If you could reach them,  
you would ride their fins  
under the horizon,  
then surf the crash of waves  
left in their wake.  
And if I could grasp  
my own fear,  
I'd drown it,  
leave it breathless and blue  
as this ocean,  
as the brilliant backs  
of whales  
surfacing  
for air.

## Two Girls from Juarez

Two girls from Juarez hesitantly step toward my desk.  
 "Ms.," one says with a paperback of Plath's *Ariel*  
 corners folded and coffee stained. "Was she white  
 or black?" One with over-dyed red hair and black  
 roots announces, "She was prejudiced!"  
 I am now questioning my life in a desert; questioning  
 as lightning rips the sky like an instant of daylight  
 in the hard black lake of night. In Plath's "Daddy"  
 a black man bites a woman's heart, and all the wit  
 and the wordplay between darkness and light shrugs.  
 I am bitten. The girls want to know  
 about Plath's gasps, about her white  
 eyes in darkness. One wears an electronic  
 bracelet around her ankle.  
 The other's cheeks red with too much rouge.  
 I imagine they live nights dangerously  
 in an Oldsmobile near the Rio Grande,  
 that they love for real and they love to love.  
 I smile at them with no answer. I lost answers  
 long ago and the faces of my colleagues grew ghost-like  
 and words fell away and the poetry cancer came  
 like a priest for the sacrifice.

## Poesía de Maquiladora

I am swept into a sadness, still  
 and unspeakable in sterile rooms where  
 men might as well wear white coats  
 and drink my breath from stethoscopes.

They were so happy to show us  
 the habits of locusts, drain blood  
 into plastic bags of their manufacturing.  
 Tell us, Latina, was it what they  
 assumed it was, broken language,  
 poetry of a lesser nature, a wound?

The way my brown knees  
 slammed hard in the fall  
 from what was left of grace.

My eyes shrunk to slits, my only  
 salvation came in the flight of grackles,  
 the way the moon swelled, striped  
 with red-orange light.

It has rained more this spring.  
 I am sick of having to watch what I say.  
 The grackles have beaten the songs down  
 with their desperate caws.  
 The tree branches scream, too, now.

The most intelligent doctors walk  
 through their patients. Assume a sickness.  
 My mind has pleated itself  
 in a veil of shadows.  
 My body is fading  
 back to an invisible border.

## Kool Logic

The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism; *Fredric Jameson*

1

I hope this finds you in good health  
(Or at least gainfully employed).  
We're here to discuss the hologram-self  
In the era of the void.

Some say modern man is hollow,  
Others say it's a condition  
Called "postmodern." Do you follow?  
Could this use some exposition?

2

O.K. See the common graves  
Rotting in the ancient cities?  
The fast food? The porous borders?  
The ambiguous sexualities?

The debt-bludgeoned ethnicities?  
The wars of chemical roses?  
Cash flows from Utopian rivers  
And the market never closes!

*"This is the kool logic  
Of late capitalism."*

3

In the Prozac marketplaces  
People hoard new modes of leisure;  
Love has been deregulated:  
Plastic breasts! Prosthetics! Seizures!

In the suburbs neighbors mourn  
The death drive of their libidos,  
Late summers full of soft porn,  
Stolen Wonder Bras, torn Speedos.

*"This is the kool logic  
Of late capitalism."*

## 4

You can consume what you please:  
 From world music to new age;  
 Ricky Martin and John Cage  
 Are touring the Basque Pyrenees;

You can sing your songs of peace  
 (Pop! Punk! Folk! Tribal! Assorted!)  
 But the violence will not cease,  
 Hate's fetus can't be aborted!

*"This is the kool logic  
 Of late capitalism."*

## 5

Macrobiotic-cybernetic-  
 Fiber-optic folderol!  
 Neo-gothic supermodels!  
 Satellites and virtual malls!

Vegan power lunch grand slams!  
 Word elites! Money-go-rounds!  
 Free will or free (pillow?) shams  
 In the global shantytown?

*"This is the kool logic  
 Of late capitalism."*

## 6

NAFTA, Mercosur, Hamas!  
 DVDs and open mikes!  
 Watercress and motocross!  
 SUVs and mountain bikes!

Trailer parks! Gated communities!  
 High-rise ghettos and favelas!  
 Acquired diplomatic immunities!  
 Self-help prophets! Braille novelas!

Mexico, Miami, Río!  
 Euro-Disney, Bollywood!  
 Dell, Intel, Taco Bell, Geo!  
 Stanford post-docs in da hood!

I'll stop fronting pedagogical . . .  
 One last question (extra credit):  
 This kool logic ain't too logical  
 But it's still "kool." Do you get it?!

*"This is the kool logic  
 Of late capitalism."*

# Paul Martinez Pompa

## How to Hear Chicago

Here a spirit must yell  
to be heard yet a bullet  
  
need only whisper to make  
its point—sometimes I imagine  
  
you right before your death  
with an entire city in your ears.

## After Words

Even the sidewalk aches. Burnt out street  
lights bow down as if ashamed. Somehow  
  
the fat oak on the corner dodged the bullets.  
So did the bus-stop bench no one ever sits  
  
on. A child, her mother, both struck  
with panic moments after the first pop.  
  
There's something surreal about being  
shot at. How the snap of gunfire  
  
pauses you. Then the rush of blood,  
like an electric shock, to the brain. Horror  
  
& elation of being alive. Soon crucifixes  
& candles will drape this corner  
  
like a hand-me-down blanket. Of course,  
no one seen nothing. Only the sound  
  
of lead wedged in a young man's back.  
After the neighbors, the cops will

interrogate the liquor store security  
video across the street. This chore  
of solving the crime, like trying to piece  
together a jigsaw puzzle, blank side up.

### Busted Lullaby

lull of determined  
thumps against his head & back  
again & again

again lull again  
head thumps & determined his  
against of & back

back again against  
thumps of & lull & his head  
determined again

### 3 Little Pigs

Me & uncle in a car when a police pulls us over yelling aiming his gun at  
uncle's head when second police comes with more sirens & fear & get  
down on the floor uncle tells me & don't move & I don't when the first  
police pulls uncle out pushes to the street & slugs his head *POW!* his  
back *CLUNK!* when third police arrives & now 2 police aiming 1 police  
spraying & 1 uncle with fire in his eyes with snot from his nose when  
at last a police lowers his gun says wait that's not the guy sorry amigo  
& they all leave.

### Police Dog

it's all just  
play to wrap

your mouth  
around a man's

wrist barely  
break skin

to growl tug  
hold on till

the officers  
arrive only then

do things  
get serious

**L**orna Dee Cervantes was born in 1954 in the Mission District of San Francisco, and later moved to San Jose with her mother and brother. Cervantes began writing poetry at a young age. She edited, published, and printed a small-press journal, *Mango*, which successfully promoted other Chicano poets and helped establish her own reputation. She began to receive national attention in the late 1970s. After spending nine months at the Fine Arts Workshop in Provincetown, Massachusetts, she completed *Emplumada* (1981), the title of which is an amalgam of the participle "emplumado" (feathered or in plumage) and the nouns "pluma" (pen) and "plumada" (a pen stroke).

*Emplumada* is divided into three sections dealing with the social environment, the class status of women, the poet's harmonious relationship with the world of nature, and the act of writing, among other things. "Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, an Intelligent, Well-Read Person, Could Believe in the War Between the Races" attempts to understand her world through the act of writing. Her full realization as a Chicana is articulated in "Visions of Mexico While at a Writing Symposium in Port Townsend, Washington."

Cervantes has come to terms with her multiple and complex identities. About her 1981 collection, Roberta Fernández says: "Written in a controlled language and with brilliant imagery, *Emplumada* is the work of a poet who is on her way to becoming a major voice in American literature." Cervantes's later collection, *From the Cables of Genocide: Poems on Love and Hunger* (1991), validates Fernández's sentiments.

**Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me  
How I, an Intelligent, Well-Read Person,  
Could Believe in the War Between the Races**

In my land there are no distinctions.  
The barbed wire politics of oppression  
have been torn down long ago. The only reminder  
of past battles, lost or won, is a slight  
rutting in the fertile fields.

In my land  
 people write poems about love,  
 full of nothing but contented childlike syllables.  
 Everyone reads Russian short stories and weeps.  
 There are no boundaries.  
 There is no hunger, no  
 complicated famine or greed.

I am not a revolutionary.  
 I don't even like political poems.  
 Do you think I can believe in a war between races?

I can deny it. I can forget about it  
 when I'm safe  
 living in my own continent of harmony  
 and home, but I am not  
 there.

I believe in revolution  
 because everywhere the crosses are burning,  
 sharp-shooting goose-steppers round every corner,  
 there are snipers in the school . . .  
 (I know you don't believe this.  
 You think this is nothing  
 but faddish exaggeration. But they  
 are not shooting at you.)

I'm marked by the color of my skin.  
 The bullets are discrete and designed to kill slowly.  
 They are aiming at my children.  
 These are facts.  
 Let me show you my wounds: my stumbling mind, my  
 "excuse me" tongue, and this  
 nagging preoccupation  
 with the feeling of not being good enough.

These bullets bury deeper than logic.  
 Racism is not intellectual.  
 I can not reason these scars away.

Outside my door  
 there is a real enemy  
 who hates me.

I am a poet  
 who yearns to dance on rooftops,  
 to whisper delicate lines about joy  
 and the blessings of human understanding.  
 I try. I go to my land, my tower of words and  
 bolt the door, but the typewriter doesn't fade out  
 the sounds of blasting and muffled outrage.  
 My own days bring me slaps on the face.  
 Everyday I am deluged with reminders  
 that this is not  
 my land  
 and this is my land.

I do not believe in the war between the races  
 but in this country  
 there is war.

[1981]

### **Visions of Mexico While at a Writing Symposium in Port Townsend, Washington**

#### *Mexico*

When I'm that far south, the old words  
 molt off my skin, the feathers  
 of all my nervousness.  
 My own words somersault naturally as my name,  
 joyous among all those meadows: Michoacan,  
 Vera Cruz, Tenochtitlán, Oaxaca . . .  
 Pueblos green on the low hills  
 where men slap handballs below acres of maiz.  
 I watch and understand.  
 My frail body has never packed mud  
 or gathered in the full weight of the harvest.

Alone with the women in the adobe, I watch men,  
their taut faces holding in all their youth.  
This far south we are governed by the law  
of the next whole meal.  
We work and watch seabirds elbow their wings  
in migratory ways, those mispronouncing gulls  
coming south  
to refuge or gameland.

I don't want to pretend I know more  
and can speak all the names. I can't.  
My sense of this land can only ripple through my veins  
like the chant of an epic corrido.  
I come from a long line of eloquent illiterates  
whose history reveals what words don't say.  
Our anger is our way of speaking,  
the gesture is an utterance more pure than word.  
We are not animals  
but our senses are keen and our reflexes,  
accurate punctuation.  
All the knifings in a single night, low-voiced  
scufflings, sirens, gunnings . . .  
We hear them  
and the poet within us bays.

#### *Washington*

I don't belong this far north.  
The uncomfortable birds gawk at me.  
They hem and haw from their borders in the sky.  
I heard them say: Mexico is a stumbling comedy.  
A loose-legged Cantinflas woman  
acting with Pancho Villa drunkenness.  
Last night at the tavern  
this was all confirmed  
in a painting of a woman: her glowing  
silk skin, a halo  
extending from her golden coiffure  
while around her, dark-skinned men with Jap slant eyes

were drooling in a caricature of machismo.  
Below it, at the bar, two Chicanas  
hung at their beers. They had painted black  
birds that dipped beneath their eyelids.  
They were still as foam while the men  
fiddled with their asses, absently;  
the bubbles of their teased hair snapped  
open in the forced wind of the beating fan.

there are songs in my head I could sing you  
songs that could drone away  
all the Mariachi bands you thought you ever heard  
songs that could tell you what I know  
or have learned from my people  
but for that I need words  
simple black nymphs between white sheets of paper  
obedient words obligatory words words I steal  
in the dark when no one can hear me.

as pain sends seabirds south from the cold  
I come north  
to gather my feathers  
for quills

[1981]

946, is con-  
nited States.  
's Jim Lehrer

on of Richard  
cal essays, is  
this aestheti-  
political is-  
points, includ-  
is alienation  
action pro-  
ne're important

*TRY laughs and happily embraces*  
[1978]

**T**ato Laviera is a varied artist — poet, musician, dramatist, and songwriter — whose works and performances reflect what has been called the Nuyorican modality. Born in Puerto Rico in 1950, he migrated with his family in 1960 to New York's Lower East Side. Like many Nuyorican poets, Laviera had little academic training. Nevertheless he has produced a substantial body of work and has received critical recognition, including an invitation by President Carter in 1980 to read at a White House gathering of American poets.

Laviera's poetry has been promoted by such scholarly critics as Juan Flores, who compares his work to that of Pedro Pietri for its defiant tone and open expression of ethnic pride. His first collection, *La Carrera Made à U-Turn* (1979), is a U.S. Puerto Rican's response to René Marqués's classic drama *La carreta* (*The Oxcart*, 1953), in which the famous Puerto Rican author traces the archetypical emigrant's journey from the rural areas of the island to the slums of San Juan and the ghettos of the South Bronx. *La carreta* has been widely perceived as an emblematic depiction of the Puerto Rican diaspora; corrupted by foreign values, the emigrant family deteriorates morally and culturally. The play closes with the vision of a return to the mythified island and its traditional values as a form of personal and national redemption.

Laviera's book gives voice to the millions of Puerto Ricans for whom a permanent return to the island is impossible; nevertheless, in Laviera's poetry, those emigrants can still legitimately claim to be a valuable part of Puerto Rican culture. His skillful use of code-switching, or "Spanglish," reveals the linguistic dilemma of this population, as in his oft-quoted, subversively ironic poem "My Graduation Speech."

The influence of music, particularly African rhythms, combined

with a keen ear for street talk, double talk, and barrio dialect, make Laviera's works best appreciated in public presentations. His third collection, *American* (1986), is a tribute to multiethnicity and to Laviera's ongoing efforts to redefine Americanness apart from the mythological melting pot.

### My Graduation Speech

i think in spanish

i write in english

i want to go back to puerto rico,  
but i wonder if my kink could live  
in ponce, mayagüez and carolina

tengo las venas aculturadas

escribo en spanglish

abraham in español

abraham in english

tato in spanish

"taro" in english

tonto in both languages

how are you?

¿cómo estás?

i don't know if i'm coming  
or si me fui ya

si me dicen barranquitas, yo reply,  
"¿con qué se come eso?"

si me dicen caviar, i digo,  
"a new pair of converse sneakers."

ahí supe que estoy jodío

ahí supe que estamos jodíos

english or spanish

spanish or english

spanenglish

now, dig this:

hablo lo inglés matao  
 hablo lo español matao  
 no sé leer ninguno bien  
 so it is, spanglish to matao  
 what i digo  
 ¡ay, virgen, yo no sé hablar!

[1979]

**AmeRican**

we gave birth to a new generation,  
 AmeRican, broader than lost gold  
 never touched, hidden inside the  
 puerto rican mountains.

we gave birth to a new generation,  
 AmeRican, it includes everything  
 imaginable you-name-it-we-got-it  
 society.

we gave birth to a new generation,  
 AmeRican salutes all folklores,  
 european, indian, black, spanish,  
 and anything else compatible:

AmeRican, singing to composer pedro flores' palm  
 trees high up in the universal sky!

AmeRican, sweet soft spanish danzas gypsies  
 moving lyrics la española cascabeling  
 presence always singing at our side!

AmeRican, beating jíbaro modern troubadours  
 crying guitars romantic continental  
 bolero love songs!

AmeRican, across forth and across back  
 back across and forth back  
 forth across and back and forth  
 our trips are walking bridges!  
 it all dissolved into itself, the attempt

was truly made, the attempt was truly  
 absorbed, digested, we spit out  
 the poison, we spit out the malice,  
 we stand, affirmative in action,  
 to reproduce a broader answer to the  
 marginality that gobbled us up abruptly!

AmeRican, walking plena-rhythms in new york,  
 strutting beautifully alert, alive,  
 many turning eyes wondering,  
 admiring!

AmeRican, defining myself my own way any way many  
 ways AmeRican, with the big R and the  
 accent on the i!

AmeRican, like the soul gliding talk of gospel  
 boogie music!

AmeRican, speaking new words in spanglish tenements,  
 fast tongue moving street corner "que  
 corta" talk being invented at the insistence  
 of a smile!

AmeRican, abounding inside so many ethnic english  
 people, and out of humanity, we blend  
 and mix all that is good!

AmeRican, integrating in new york and defining our  
 own destino, our own way of life,

AmeRican, defining the new america, humane america,  
 admired america, loved america, harmonious  
 america, the world in peace, our energies  
 collectively invested to find other civiliza-  
 tions, to touch God, further and further,  
 to dwell in the spirit of divinity!

AmeRican, yes, for now, for i love this, my second  
 land, and i dream to take the accent from  
 the altercation, and be proud to call  
 myself american, in the u.s. sense of the  
 word, AmeRican, America!

[1985]

**J**ulia de Burgos is one of Puerto Rico's most cherished poets; her passionate and often intimate verses reflect a keen identification with her country as well as an abiding quest for self-awareness and authenticity as a woman. Born in a rural area of Puerto Rico in 1914 to a large and needy family, she was nevertheless able, with great sacrifice, to obtain a teaching degree in 1933.

Burgos's biography is as well known as her works. The decade of the 1930s witnessed a surge in nationalist spirit on the island, and Julia de Burgos shared in this ideal, extending it in later years to a more pan-Caribbean and internationalist perspective. These were also intensely active years artistically for her: she published *Poemas exactos a mí misma* (Exact Poems to Myself) in 1937; several children's plays and *Poemas en veinte surcos* (Poems in Twenty Rows) in 1938; and *Canción de la verdad sencilla* (The Song of Simple Truth) in 1939. After the breakup of her first marriage, Burgos traveled to New York in 1940, then went on to Cuba to be reunited with a man she loved but who refused to acknowledge their relationship. The mystery surrounding this affair became part of the poet's mystique, as did her tragic years in New York City. She spent the last eleven years of her life there, struggling to come to terms with her disillusionment and yearning to find justice and meaning.

Burgos continued to write and participate in political causes in New York. Her final collection, *El mar y tú* (The Sea and You), published posthumously in 1954, contains many of the works written during the New York years, including the poem translated here, "Returning." Suffering from the effects of alcohol, Burgos was repeatedly hospitalized; "Farewell in Welfare Island" was written in English during one of those hospital stays. She wrote several prophetic poems about her anonymous death on an island of rock, and in July 1953 Burgos's body, with no identification, was discovered on a New York City street.

The letters she wrote during her final years reflect the love/hate relationship that many immigrants feel toward the huge metropolis. While it offered her the freedom to follow her unconventional ideas, it also represented, compared to her tropical island homeland, a "vast empire of solitude and darkness." Unlike other island writers who came to the United States during those years, Burgos seems to have attempted to integrate herself into her new environment, even creating poems in English to better express this reality. For many U.S. Puerto Rican poets, especially women, Julia de Burgos is considered an important precursor, an example of what should be emu-

lated — her intense creativity, originality, and tenacity in the face of adversity — as much as what should be avoided. Her voice prefigured the Nuyorican poetic response yet to come.

### Returning

Indefinitely,  
extended like shadows and waves,  
sunburnt in salt and foam and impossible skulls,  
my sadness grows sadder;  
this orbitless sadness which is mine  
since the world became mine,  
since darkness blazed my name,  
since the first cause for all tears  
came to be my own.

It's as if I'd like to love  
and the wind doesn't let me.  
It's as if I'd like to return  
and yet can't discover why, now where to.  
It's as if I'd like to follow the course of the waters  
yet all thirst is gone.

Indefinitely . . .

A word so mine;  
ghostly specter of my specter!

There's no longer a voice,  
or tears,  
or distant sprigs of grain.  
No more shipwrecks,  
or echoes,  
not even anguish;  
silence itself is dead!

What say you, my soul, should I flee?  
Where could I go where I would not be  
shadowing my own shadow?

[1947]

Translation of "Retorno" by Dwight García  
and Margarite Fernández Olmos

## Farewell in Welfare Island

It has to be from here,  
right this instance,  
my cry into the world.

Life was somewhere forgotten  
and sought refuge in depths of tears  
and sorrows  
over this vast empire of solitude  
and darkness.

Where is the voice of freedom,  
freedom to laugh,  
to move  
without the heavy phantom of despair?

Where is the form of beauty  
unshaken in its veil simple and pure?  
Where is the warmth of heaven  
pouring its dreams of love in broken spirits?

It has to be from here,  
right this instance,  
my cry into the world.  
My cry that is no more mine,  
but hers and his forever,  
the comrades of my silence,  
the phantoms of my grave.

It has to be from here,  
forgotten but unshaken,  
among comrades of silence  
deep into Welfare Island  
my farewell to the world.

Goldwater Memorial Hospital  
Welfare Island — N.Y.C.  
February 1953

## Two Poems about Immigrant Life

Pat Mora and Gina Valdés

Latin Americans have for many years comprised the bulk of immigrants, both legal and illegal, to the United States. While today there are relatively few parts of the country that do not have significant immigrant populations, the strength in numbers does not eliminate the many hardships faced by those seeking to adapt to a new language and culture. Below we present two poems by well-known Mexican American writers with very different takes on the clash of languages. They tell us of the difficulties of immigrant life while at the same time reminding us of the ways in which these immigrants have made U.S. culture more vibrant and diverse. Pat Mora, a native of El Paso, Texas, has taught English at all levels and has published several books of poetry, as well as memoirs and children's books. Gina Valdés was born in Los Angeles, California, and was raised on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. She has taught Spanish at several universities throughout the United States and has published several works of poetry and fiction.

### ELENA, by Pat Mora

My Spanish isn't enough.  
I remember how I'd smile  
listening to my little ones,  
understanding every word they'd say,  
their jokes, their songs, their plots.  
*Vamos a pedirle dulces a mamá. Vamos.*  
But that was in Mexico.  
Now my children go to American high schools.  
They speak English. At night they sit around  
the kitchen table, laugh with one another.  
I stand by the stove and feel dumb, alone.  
I bought a book to learn English.  
My husband frowned, drank more beer.  
My oldest said, "Mamá, he doesn't want you

732 Pat Mora and Gina Valdés



(From Virgil Hancock, *Chihuahua: Pictures from the Edge*, photographs by Virgil Hancock, essay by Charles Bowden [Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996]).

to be smarter than he is." I'm forty,  
embarrassed at mispronouncing words,  
embarrassed at the laughter of my children,  
the grocer, the mailman. Sometimes I take  
my English book and lock myself in the bathroom,  
say the thick words softly,  
for if I stop trying, I will be deaf  
when my children need my help.

### ENGLISH CON SALSA, by Gina Valdés

Welcome to ESL 100, English Surely Latinized,  
inglés con chile y cilantro, English as American  
as Benito Juárez. Welcome, muchachos from Xochicalco,  
learn the language of dólares and dolores, of kings  
and queens, of Donald Duck and Batman. Holy Toluca!  
In four months you'll be speaking like George Washington,  
in four weeks you can ask, More coffee? In two months

you can say, May I take your order? In one year you  
can ask for a raise, cool as the Tuxpan River.

Welcome, muchachas from Teocaltiche, in this class  
we speak English refrito, English con sal y limón,  
English thick as mango juice, English poured from  
a clay jug, English tuned like a requinto from Uruapán,  
English lighted by Oaxacan dawns, English spiked  
with mezcal from Juchitán, English with a red cactus  
flower blooming in its heart.

Welcome, welcome, amigos del sur, bring your Zapotec  
tongues, your Nahuatl tones, your patience of pyramids,  
your red suns and golden moons, your guardian angels,  
your duendes, your patron saints, Santa Tristeza,  
Santa Alegría, Santo Todolopuede. We will sprinkle  
holy water on pronouns, make the sign of the cross  
on past participles, jump like fish from Lake Pátzcuaro  
on gerunds, pour tequila from Jalisco on future perfects,  
say shoes and shit, grab a cool verb and pollo loco  
and dance on the walls like chapulines.

When a teacher from La Jolla or a cowboy from Santee  
asks you, Do you speak English? You'll answer, Sí,  
yes, simón, of course. I love English!  
And you'll hum  
a Mixtec chant that touches la tierra and the heavens.