

HONORING THE STONES

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THE BORDERLAND.....	3
COMANCHE ROADS	5
TESTIMONY.....	6
THE CRY	7
MONTE ALBAN.....	9
THE POND	10
TEXMEX HISTORY	12
CHOCOLATE	13
CANTAROS	15
CHISPA	18
ROCK SOUP.....	20
PRIZE WATERMELON	21
A KNOWLEDGE OF WATER.....	24
WARRIOR HORSE.....	25
BLUE HORSE	26
CHILI PIQUINS	27
THE BIG "O"	28
A HUNDRED WORDS FOR ANGER.....	29
SCENE OF THE DEAD MAN.....	31
NAMING NAMES	36
THE SEARCH	38
AT MY MOTHER'S GRAVE	40
STONEMASON	41
HONORING THE STONES.....	42
THE MILL HAG.....	45
SESSKILGRENE.....	48
THE TRIPLE GODDESS	49
THE RUIN	50
UNMARKED GRAVES.....	51
CEIDE FIELDS.....	52
CREC'H QUILLE.....	54
WHAT TO SAY TO THE STONES	55
LAS MARIPOSAS	60

THE BORDERLAND

Comanche Roads

Source: Peyote Religion. A History by Omer C Stewart.

University of Oklahoma Press: Norman and London

COMANCHE ROADS

Before I was born
before borders and barbed wire
Indians from the valleys of Mexico
followed herds of deer and buffalo
on migrations north into the Great Plains
and back again

Each year from Mexico
a band of devout Huichols
walks north for forty days
following tracks of sacred deer
along the foothills of Sierra Madre Occidental
And from the north
Cherokee, Shawnee, Tonkawa, Kiowa
Comanche, Choctaw, Chickasaw....
travel south on the *Old Comanche Roads*

Seeking the *Spirit Home of the First People*
hidden behind a place called *Clashing Clouds*
on the upper reaches of the Chihuahuan Desert
between *Where the Vagina Is*
and *Where the Penis Hangs*
in the land *Where the Sun was Born*

TESTIMONY

like that bright day
four point nine million years ago
when the first of our fathers stood upright
and swaggered slowly across the savanna
trying to impress his mate-to-be
with the power of the first *full frontal*
like the day my father stepped out of the shower
cloaked in a cloud of steam
the glistening torso of a Roman soldier
a towel for a head, no arms, no feet
a weapon in the shape of a cross
dangling from his waist
as Adam in the Old Testament
I cupped my hands over my cluster
bearing witness in sacred testimony
to the Holy Trinity
and from that day understood
why my father sat for hours in the basement
working neat's-foot oil into the black
twelve foot long glistening body of the bullwhip
braiding white silk tips on the end
so the snap would sound like a gunshot

THE CRY

Sometimes in the crib
I dreamed my mother was dying
and woke with a cry in my throat

Sometimes the cry came from me
sometimes from her room
sometimes from the dark

If she was there in the morning
it was the coyotes calling
and I'd be fed to them in the night

One moonlit night they came
laughing and scratching at my screen
...like I was a dying rabbit

And before they left
pissed on the front porch
and called my mother's name

Los Danzantes

Bas-relief figure of a so called Danzante or 'dancer'.
This is a portrait of a slain enemy whose name glyph
appears in front of his mouth.

Source: Mexico. From the Olmecs to the Aztecs
By Michael D. Coe
Thames & Hudson, Ltd., London

MONTE ALBAN

A slain enemy
blood flows from his chest
with his last breath, he coughs out his name

I recognize something in him
the meaning will come
if I avert my eyes, show proper respect

and say the words as a Zapotec
Mixtitlan, ayautitlan
out of the clouds, out of the mist

In a dream, I am a were-jaguar
the infant with a cleft head
held dying in the lap of the fire god

Who is the enemy?
My father comes up from the cellar
breaking the door down with an axe

My mother takes me by the heels
wields me like a club
and bludgeons him to death

THE POND

By the end of summer
When the water in the pond
Turned black
It was my job to save the fish

At the edge of the pond
Dreaming of golden reefs
I heard the cry of tadpoles...
Tiny whales longing for the sea

I saw teeming histories
Castles and creatures of the deep
Stacked beneath the surface
Like generations of an ancient city

Water choked with algae
Drained away --
I embraced and bundled
Slimy stalks of drooping lilies

And chased fingerlings
From catchment to catchment
Scooping them into buckets
With a kitchen sieve

When the pond was safe again
Scrubbed clean in quick-lime
By the gardener in rubber boots
I licked the trembling hearts

Of scum covered minnows
Replacing them
One by one
Into the reborn waters

And said a child's prayer
Hoping that one day
When my sky goes black
One of them will remember

LA ALBERCA

Al fin del verano
cuando el agua en la alberca
se ennegrecia
era mi tarea slavar a los peces

Al lado de la alberca
sonando de arrefices dorados
escuche el lorrar de los renacuajos
pequenas ballenas anhelado el mar

Vi historias replentas
castillos y criaturas de mar profundo
amontonados como generaciones
de un ciudade uantigua

Vaciamos el agua
atascado de algas
y abrazabando y bultando
los tallos viscos de nenufares caidos

Persiguiendo a los pececillos
de cuenca a cuenca
cuchareandolos en blades
con un cedazo

Cuando la albercda ya estba limpia
bien fregada con cal viva
por el jardinero con botas de gomo
yo lamia los corazones temblorosos

De los pececillos cubeirtos de verdin
deloviendolos
uno por uno
a las aguas renacidas

Y dije una oracion de nino
rogando que un dia
cuando mi cielo se ennegrecia
uno de ellos me recuerde

TEXMEX HISTORY

My mother would say -
“You are pure Irish and don't you forget
who you are or where you came from”
but I didn't feel Irish
and wasn't sure about being Texan
having grown up on the border
where most of the Texans I knew
were Mexicans
and it wasn't such a good idea
to be Mexican
unless you lived in Mexico
and Mexicans in Mexico
wanted to be Spanish
where ladies of rank
had dark fuzz above the lip
and didn't shave their legs

and you wouldn't want to be Mestizo
worse to be pure Indian
with an Oriental look about the eyes
and a back-slanted forehead

CHOCOLATE

The desert a giant stone mortar
 ground everything down into candy
leche quemada a poor man=s chocolate
 made from burnt milk and *carrizo*
 candy darker and richer going south
 from *leche quemada* to *chocolate*
chocolate chocolatl xocolatl
 past mountains and cities
 a smoldering pot of dark red *chili mole*
 where the bowels of earth boiled over
 30000 years ago at the volcano of Xcitli
 leaving a thick dark crust of ashes and blood

Where everyone ate earth with one finger
 upon arriving at a new place
 made offerings of flowers and fire
 burning incense of *copali*
 in rattle-stone ladles made of clay

Where men slashed their ear lobes in prayer
 drank *chocolate* with ground up flowers
chocolate with *chilis* and *octili* wine
 with cakes of waterfly worms
 and sang this song before the deity
 attesting to the purity of heart

yc nima tlalquia
y aquin ynic quineltliaia
itlatol^l

XOCOLATL

El desierto es un mortero gigante
que mole toda al caramelo
cambiandolo a chocolate de los pobres
con leche quemada y carrizo
un caramelo mas oscuro y rico
caundo mas se va al sur
leche quemada a chocolate
chocolate *chocolatl xocolatl*
allende las montanas y ciudades
olla hirviente con chili mole oscuro
donde las entranas de la tierra rebozaron
30000 anos atras en el volcan de Xictli
dejando espesa corteza de cenizas y sangre

Al llegar a un lugar nuevo
comian la tierra con un dedo
haciendo ofertas de flores y fuego
quemando incienso de *copali*
en un cucharon y troqueta de barro

Donde los hombres cuchillaban
el lobulo de las oreja bebiendo
chocolate con flores molidas
chocolate con chilis y *vctili vino*
comiendo *tecuatl* y *vcuiltamali*
cantando esta cancion para su dioses
testigando a la pureza del corazon

yc nama tlalquia
y aquin ynic quineltiana
itlatol²

² Si lo que dice es la veradad, come tierra

CANTAROS

(jugs that sing)

Aunt Ada big as a *casa* lived in Mexico
in the village of Tepeyacac
where she crawled on her knees
to take communion
at the altar of the Black Virgin
Our Lady of Guadalupe
descended from Tonantzin (blood eater)
mother of Quetzalcoatl and Tezatlipoca
Gods known to me
from the cardboard copy of the codex
Aunt Ada gave me for my 6th birthday

Her tiny house crammed full of trinkets
Huichol masks with human hair and teeth
tarnished silver tree of life on the wall
a small *cantaro* from Tonalá
made of *barro canelo* an aromatic clay
women of the day chewed to get high

She poured water into the *cantaro*
filling the room with the scent of flowers
but didn't let me drink from it
said it makes little boys *loco*
took me on her lap to tell me
the Aztec version of Christ on the cross
how flowers spilled from the wound
when His body was pierced

Before God gave us His Only Begotten Son
before the first Seven Days of the Holy Bible
giant green bats drank the blood of children
shat the world into existence
and if you listen at night
you hear the cries of children
as giant bats nibble their toes
in the caves of Sierra Guadalupe
cannibals still hunger
and bats hang their heads in shame

My Aunt Ada comes to me in a dream
I am perched on her lap
afraid I will fall in when she laughs
she hands me the *cantaro*

I drink from it
taste the earth that sings -
 Take eat...His body and blood
 which was given for thee...

*Ke-e-eala, ke-e-eala, isoe-e-eiala, wando
wisloe esaeilala
ke-keala oae-e-eao.³*

³ This is a song they say an old woman recited in a sacred language and that is why we cannot explain it. The elders say it refers to all the suffering the earth was to endure in this world. (Bierhorst)

Two Rabbits

Ceramic plate with two rabbits, painted by Amado Galvan, 1940.

Source: Nagual in the Garden. *Fantastic Animals in Mexican Ceramics*. Leonore Hoag Mulryan
UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

CHISPA

On days he fixed a stew
 cooking it down to a hot red oily stock
 added hominy, vegetables, salt pork
 bits of meat from a rabbit he shot
 served it with tortillas de harina
 chilipiquines that raised a blister
 if the juice touched your lip

In the shade of the lean-to
 we watched *plumas de fuego*
 Afeathers of fire's flutter on end
 drain color from the underside
 of fresh turned clods of gingerbread
 earth and below the fields the Rio Grande
 laid out to dry across the flat river bed
 like the molted skin of a rattle snake
 as Chispa began to chant

Ay ya yao
ayya yya ynye au
coztic quauhtli, coztic coyotl
coztic coatl, coztic tochin, coztic macatl

A Nahuatl song of animal dreams
 how to get inside their skin
sueños de nagual about a yellow eagle,
 yellow coyote, yellow snake, yellow rabbit,
 yellow deer

He taught me to call quail
 blowing ocarina notes
 through my thumb knuckles
 to call up rutting bucks
 with a doe's wail bleated out
 on a mesquite carved cacto-reed

In the rabbit's dream
 I become the prey
 from the edge of a child's voice
 give the high pitched scream
 of a dying rabbit

When the rabbit is caught
 in the jaws of the coyote

it sings three songs

A cry of alarm
warning others not to come
When fangs crack his skull
a shriek of terror shatters the dream
The last notes are the weeping of a child

Chispa sings
Ay ya yao
ayya yya ynye au
yyaha, yya yya, yya ayya, ayyo oviya
temictli, quitemiquiz, tochtiz⁴

Crouched behind a clump of mesquite
I finish the song and look up
into the snout-sharp glare of a she-coyote
locked eye-to-eye with me as rabbit
her four running mates frozen still

None of us know what comes next
until she breaks the spell
acknowledging me as if to speak
and as she turned to leave
I swear - I heard her laugh

Yyaha, yya yya, yya ayya, ayyo oviya
ayya yya, ayya yya yyo viya, ayya yya ayya
yya
yyo viya

So goes the rabbit's song

⁴ Dreams, he will dream of it, he will become a rabbit.

ROCK SOUP

Chispa puts a rusty iron pot on the wood stove, stokes it with mesquite and begins making soup. He pours water from a clay jug balanced on his hip, adds greens, onions, peppers and fresh tomatoes I brought from the market. Turnips and long white radishes came from his garden patch out back. He takes out an old wooden box lined with parchment and pinches out a palm of red dirt, asks me to taste it and put some in the pot. It is magic clay for rock soup, he says.

While the pot boils, we go outside to the shade of a lean-to looking out over the shimmer of glazed dirt fields to the river below. Where we planted cedar fence posts until my hands bled, strung barbed wire as tight as a piano.

*There is a time in the Mexican desert
when nothing moves
No living thing quivers, twitches or crawls
not even to save itself*

*The sun arcs to its peak
rivers run onto themselves as they slow
making big loops in the mud
and shadows blur under the scrub*

Chispa gets up, motions it's time to start the hunt. Bare to the waist and without guns, we begin. First the creek beds. Scanning under scrub brush, squinting for shadows that shouldn't be there, we study rocks looking for an eye blink. Suddenly, Chispa leaps up. Both of us hurdle full speed over brush chasing the cottontail flushed out, not from behind a rock but, the rock itself bounding away and we follow side stepping, vaulting over and through, jerk to a halt when the rabbit slows . . . then go again, flushing the rabbit to the next spot-- seven times: the running, flushing, stopping-- until finally the rabbit stops under a scrub-- gasping, gagging - shows us a tiny pink tongue. Chispa walks over and gently picks him up by the ears.

He hands me the rabbit to carry back to the shack. Cradled and quiet in my arms, his heart whirs against my chest. Inside, Chispa lifts the rabbit by the ears again, stretching him lengthwise over the pot as I hold his body. Then he slits the rabbit's throat letting hot blood pour out into our soup.

When we finish lunch, we take a nap in the shade of the lean-to. I close my eyes to the sound of chanting. Chispa says he's offering a prayer of thanks to the rabbit in its own tongue.

PRIZE WATERMELON

I carry a huge striped watermelon
 cradled in my arms like a baby
 making my way slowly
 across deep rows of a plowed field
 toward the blue '38 Ford pickup

Chispa stands in the truck bed
 in white chinos, sweat stained Panama
 knee deep in watermelons
 arranging them so they won't break
 on the bumpy ride back

I lift my prize to him
 it bumps off the running board
 onto hard ground and splits open
 exposing that I am not yet a man
 big enough to help

Chispa taught me *la vida es un sueno*
 life is a waking dream
 seen through the eyes of a *nagual*⁵
 he asks *?que quiere decir el sueno?*
 I answer it is a bad omen
 that my life is a failure
 I cannot do anything right
 and he says, *ahorita, dame un pedacito*

I hand him a piece
 he motions for me take one
 as we eat the hot sweetness
 asks me to enter the dream
desde adentro de tu conejito
 he wants me inside my rabbit
 ----with a snap of his fingers
 I'm in the watermelon dream

When I get big enough to leave
 I forget Chispa and turn my back on
la dulzura del sueno de conejo
 the sweetness of the rabbit dream
 to live in the other world

⁵ *Nagual* - a fantastic animal, spiritual double. *Nahui olin* in Nahuatl means Amovement of the heart≡.

in which I drop the watermelon

Horse Head

Paleolithic horse's head carved in low relief
from the cave at Commarque, Dordogne, France.

Source:

Treasures of Prehistoric Art, Andre Leroi-Gourham
Henry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, New York

A KNOWLEDGE OF WATER

On a caliche cliff overlooking the Rio Grande, my horse Albert and I watch the sun flash on mica chips in the hills across the river. Signals pulse from Apache warriors. With a mesquite stick I draw the skeleton of a fish in the sand. The mouth is San Antonio, one eye for the ranch in Laredo. The other eye Nuevo Laredo. The Chihuahuan Desert the body between the two Sierras. The tail crosses Monte Alban far to the south.

This desert was once an ocean teeming with fish. I sit on the edge of its memory feeling the power of the sun.

The faded trail I follow is the way to the next water hole, not the shortest distance between two points.

Knowledge of water, not a compass, is what one needs in this desert.

Some fish found in the brackish water of these puddles dropped from the sky.

WARRIOR HORSE

Bareback like an Apache
I ride my horse Albert
to the top of the caliche cliff
dream I'm the last son of Cochise
all my brothers dead

Cross-legged on a saddle blanket
overlooking the Rio Grande
I pray as the sun reaches its peak
believing I can see all the way to Oaxaca
four hundred miles south

A hole opens in the desert floor
screaming horses with flaming hooves
topple headlong into the tar rimmed pit
riders float up from their mounts
arms open to the sky

An old Indian told me
this is the place where nothing lives --
a burial ground for old stories
where descendants of the Olmec
lost their Spirit Home

I believe this -
for I saw the sun burn a hole
through the center of the earth
the year before they built the dam
that covers the hole where I buried
my warrior horse

BLUE HORSE

Albert was old when I got him
he might have been a true "blue"
but when I first saw him in the sun
his hide shone through silver
like the skin of a Mexican hairless

On that last day
when his time had come
he led me along caliche cliffs
to a bone drift
at the damp end of a dry creek
where I shot him

I waited
for the buzzards
the maggots and the sun

I waited
for the rainless flood
to tumble-dry his bones

waited
for his vowel sounds
to echo from the cliffs

While I waited
he turned ice blue
like a fresh caught trout losing color to the sun

CHILI PIQUINS

Lately, I've been putting cayenne pepper on almost everything I eat. Increasing intensity like an addict. Just last week I bought a package of dried habaneros labeled "hot! 250,000 Scoville units"⁶. Trying to think of a recipe, other than for enchiladas or curry, one worthy of such power.

The hottest peppers I knew were chili piquins, about the size of a small pea with a stem. Served uncooked, like jellybeans. Plucked carefully off their stems with the teeth so the juice would not touch your lips. Anywhere the juice touched, outside of the inside of your mouth, would raise a blister. A bite of meat, then two or three chili piquins, then chew holding back the tears. If you cried, you'd cut back on the dose until you built a tolerance.

My father wouldn't touch them. He was from Chicago. My mother, who grew up in Laredo, was a great chili eater. My brother didn't really try. But, I was the champion. They say capsaicin in chilies brings out endorphins like a runner's high, releasing hormones that turn pain into pleasure.

Our Mexican dog Tigre killed one of my father's guinea hens. To teach the mangy mutt a lesson, my father laced the carcass with ground chilis and forced him to eat it. Later, I found Tigre headlong into the garbage can looking for the rest of his meal. I still eat chili piquins to honor Tigre.

⁶ Scoville Units are named after Wilbur Scoville, a chemist for the Parke Davis pharmaceutical company who, in 1912, invented a method for measuring the heat level of chile peppers. The scale goes from 0 to 15,000,000 for pure capsaicin with the hottest Habaneros at more than 300,000 units. Chilipiquins are much hotter than Jalapenos and Cayenne peppers measuring at more than 80,000 Scoville units.

THE BIG "O"

I get anxious when I talk about my father. I remember him as big. Big voice, big chest, big belly. We lived on the Big "O" Ranch. He carried a gun so big it "would stop a Cadillac in its tracks". As a child, he clubbed pigs in the Chicago stockyards. By the time I was born, he and my mother were enemies.

In a picture of my father and mother before they were married, he looks dapper in a dark suit, standing next to his Buick Roadster, one foot on the running board. My mother gazes at him, flapper hat pulled down over bobbed red hair. Her eyes gleam, wet with sex....

A HUNDRED WORDS FOR ANGER

I know its many names
I know when it enters a room
crawling sideways
along yellow papered walls
a frothy slime
oozing from nose holes of dead fish

I know the way it smells before breakfast
rancid as the hairy armpit
of a harem wife twice betrayed
the sky around it swollen
the color of snow on a tombstone

To the Eskimo
there are a hundred words for snow
for we live and breathe
the elements that surround us
and I was born in a sea of anger

Yes, I know its many faces
I wake up in the morning
looking for it in my bed
I drop from the branch of a tree
and shake out my colors like a giant lizard
until the proper shade of rage unfolds
as I chant the mantra
of the ancient Aztec warrior
 yes, this is a good day to die
 yes, this is a good day to die

Scene of the Dead Man

Paleolithic cave painting.
Lascaux, Dordogne, France

SCENE OF THE DEAD MAN

1.

A wounded bison
guts hanging in loops
Tail raised, head lowered to confront
the stick figure of a man with a hard-on

In his dream the shaman
conjures the kill
so with my father
who took me hunting when I was seven

Drunk, he and his buddies
shout obscenities across the canyon
before I pull their boots off and put them to bed
In the morning, looking at a girlie picture
nailed to the wall, my father says to Johnny Ward
"I still wake up with a hard-on."

Johnny, still half drunk, takes me for a ride
in his new dark blue souped up Ford wagon
revving from zero to full speed across an open field
double clutching like a race car driver
lets me off trembling five miles from camp
the day I kill my first buck
gutting it, ladling dark blood from its belly
with cupped hands thinking now I am a man
Fifty years later this morning I wake up
on the cusp of a dream empowered by a hard-on
to write about a cave painting at Lascaux

Before the shaman enters his dream
before the naming and the stories
of Adam, Cain and Abel, of Job,
the toppling of the Tower of Babel
the darkness of the cave was lit
by swirls of energy on stone
carved vulvas, rounded female buttocks
images superimposed
etched over a period of a thousand years
as offerings at a sacred well

2.

This morning I am angry
at my father and the shaman
angry at the power of the dream
the veneration of the erection
the drunk dream, wet dream
stories, the stories
man's tail feathers, iridescent
spread in the darkness of the cave
stealing light
by the ritual wounding of beauty

To the first deer I killed
I say I am sorry, I am ashamed
and from the power of a hard-on
I create my version of the story --
the shaman dies ejaculating
as a man when hanged

I cower at this blasphemy
as Job groveled before Yahweh
My head separates from my body
like the tail of a lizard
growing back but deadened
my body, a living lodestone,
tries to align to true north
but caught in a devil's triangle
spins and wobbles

In this time warp
the shaman does not die
he enters me in the dream
a tapeworm stuck in my gut
feeding gluttonously on fear
growing big as a yellow tree snake

3.

My father stands
in a hospital gown tied in back
the slant of morning sun
white burn around his body
a negative print of Balzac
in a black monk's robe
hands folded across a pot belly
and under his hospital gown
a hard-on

For seven days
my father squares off at death
pacing, trying to find a way out
He rages:
“You’ll never make it without me”

Blinded by the glare
I blink at his colossal Olmec head
all jaw bone teeth and forehead
radiant in a last ditch burst
to take everything down with him

I stand my ground in silence
until his power drains away
a puddle of urine under his bed
slithers toward me
a deadly yellow snake without a head

There is a wedge of space
in the shaman’s dream
an opening at the moment of killing
before the killing, before dying
before the kingdom of heaven
brought wrack to the sacred heart
where body-mind
merges with the universe

4.

In that sacred space
my body is a jar of fireflies
phosphorescent bones
align with vapor trails in the sky
from last year’s migration of geese
beneath my feet
a webbing of leylines and songlines
connecting earth with body and sky

Unmourned grief
buried deep in stories of land
placenames call to us
cenotaphs by the roadside
pleading to be healed
in the Nahuatl of *Popocatepetl*
Apache of *bizhi igod*

Gaelic of *Poll na gCaorach*
 points of alignment
 rhymes in a bard's song
y gwir yn erbyn y byd
 -- truth against the world

5.

I grew up in *Tierra Herida*
 wounded borderland
 in the lower Rio Grande Valley
 where shame flows downriver
 a flash flood without rain

As a child I ate tadpole jelly
 to become a whale
 doused myself with coyote piss
 so my humanness wouldn't stink
 memorized red and black
 letters of the Aztec alphabet
 so I could talk with my Nagual

"To Live in the Borderlands means you
 are neither *hispana india negra espanola*
ni gabache, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed
 caught in the crossfire between camps..."
 says *una poeta Tejana*⁷

Tengo verguenza al leer sus palabras
 ashamed to read your words
 because I was jimie from laredo
 pimply snot nosed kid
 nicknamed *zancudo* - sand mosquito
 whose father was a big shot
 politician, oil man, Texas Ranger
 who would shame you
 - and I am his son

Ashamed for killing the deer
 Tengo verguenza porque mate el venado
 y porque se las palabras de la cancion
 y me quedo en silencio
 tengo verguenza por saber el dolor
 y nunca haber vuelto para lamentarlo

⁷ *Borderlands, La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa

La verguenza esta en los cuentos de la tierra
Shame is the story embedded in the land
a scorpion in a boot that stings
when I turn my back to the river
after I shoot my horse and leave home
believing I can forget
who I am and where I come from

6.

I've walked the Comanche Roads
in Zapata County
green roads on the Island of Inishbofin
followed heat seeking butterflies
from Canada to Michoacan
from a mountain of pure crystal
I saw a vision of St Patrick
loud and clear as country western
from XENT radio Mexico
offering 'genuine simulated diamonds'
and 'get your statues of Jesus Christ
it glows in the dark'

Which leaves me with these questions:

If our bones are divining rods
can they find water?

If they were used as pavement
like the bones of butterflies
could our children find their way?

NAMING NAMES

I

IZTACCHHAUTL POPOCATEPETL

SAN JUAN DE PARANGARICUTIRO

SAN JOSE MAGOTE LOMA DE ZAPOTE

XOCHIPILLI XOCHE XICHU

these words recall the heat
of the Mexican desert in the summer
on the Pan American Highway
between Monterey and Mexico City
in a 1941 non-air conditioned Cadillac
driving by the sleeping princess *Iztacihuatl*
and her lover *Popocateptl* kneeling at her side
listening for the first cries of *Paricutin*
their newborn volcano child
erupting from the belly of a corn field
a hundred miles away

II

Forty years later driving through Ireland
looking for my mother's name
in graveyards near the sea
I repeat names of villages in Gaelic
BUN NA HABHANN, LIS NA NGRADH,
CEANN BALOR, MACHARIE BUIDE
CARRAIG NA RI

I try to remember the faces
that match the names on the stones
in our Brennan family plot in Laredo
Mike, Susanah, William, Dorothy, Carrie,
Ada, Earlene, Clyde, Maude

I name plants and animals
I knew as a child riding my horse Albert
along the caliche cliffs of the Rio Grande
snakeweed, cholla, creosote, and lechuguilla,
skunks, skinks, javelina, horny toads, rattlers

In the peat bog near Lough Neagh
I go barefoot as I did at the lake in Texas
my toes sink into folds of soggy sphagnum
I say golden gorse, pale purple Erica,

Nartheceium, scarlet pimpernel, yellow asphodel

III

In a graveyard near Armagh
 in the County of Armagh, when I say
 Armagh the name sticks in my throat
 knowing this is where people get shot
 for being on either side of their fathers
 I pray for the 763 victims killed in Armagh
 since John Gallagher was shot in 1969

Silently I pray, then out loud say *Mhacha*,
Ard Mhacha, *Mhacha* of the golden hair
 golden *lunulae* and great golden beads
 orchards filled with the light of golden apples
 ripened on the shores of a lake of golden foam
 pissed into life by a giant horse

I think of my father as a child clubbing pigs
 in the stockyards of Chicago and I say *muc*,
Muckelty Muckish Muckery Mucshnamh
 "a place where pigs swim across the little lake"
 I think of Portmuck at Islandmagee
 where I studied poetry one lovely summer
 with Jimmie Simmons and wonder if I should
 dig up my father's body and re-bury it
 here in the mystical land of *Emmania Mhacha*

IV

IZTACCIHUATL POPOCATEPETL
SAN JUAN DE PARANGARICUTIRO
SAN JOSE MAGOTE LOMA DEL ZAPOTE
XOCHIPILLI XOCHE XICHU
 these words spoken in prayer
 to return the breath of each name
 into the mouth of its headstone
 and on the lap of my mother's grave
 as an infant *were-jaguar*
 seeking protection of the fire god *Xictli*
 as *mariposas* seek the volcano
 to find their way home each year
 in the mountains of Michoacan
 on the *Dia de los Muertos*

THE SEARCH

Clonmacnois

Ancient monastic site. Co. Offaly, Ireland

AT MY MOTHER'S GRAVE

I wait for stones to break the silence. And so my journey begins, looking for the perfect stone: marble in the Aran Islands, quartz at Crough Patrick, obsidian at the pyramid of Xictli in the Pedregal. I follow migrations of butterflies and whales to learn their secret. On hands and knees I re-enter the womb of earth beneath the mound at Newgrange. I take a stone from the great wall of *Dun Aonghasa*, have it cut to a high-cross and inscribed with a Gaelic prayer for my mother.

The colors of earth are drained by the desert sun
leaving each day silent.

I taste a pinch of earth from my mother's grave
recalling the smell of tidal pools and oyster beds.

An ancient glacier breaks the silence with the moan
of a cow giving birth

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STONEMASON

My stonemason John says
he uses Elberton granite from Georgia
It has the best grain and lasts the longest
How long is long I ask
Oh he says a thousand years

I want more than hard gray stone
to guard her silence
I want stone that stays alive
a megalith jammed deep into earth
an antenna to amplify the signals
emitted from her ash and bone

I went to Ireland
looking for the perfect stone
found stone cottages and monuments
mountains and fields of stone
contiuous rows of stonewalls
wound round the island like an offering

I found stone carvings of mermaids
and ancient unnamed river gods
a Sheela-na-Gig I thought I recognized
having seen her name
on the walls of a cave in the Dordogne
along with her portrait cut and shaped
on the rounded surface of soft white stone

There are no stones
where my mother and I were born
only the jagged edges of memory
ground down by the desert *molcajete*⁸
to caliche and polished round pebbles
leaving no trace of history
but an abandoned *pulque* farm
an adobe jail
and a dried up river bed

⁸ kitchen mortar made of volcanic rock.

HONORING THE STONES

1

In the Brennan family plot
I take off my jacket
shirt sticking to my body
remembering how I turned away
from Brennan kisses
ashamed in the presence of my father
Shuffling, I look down at my feet
not knowing what to say to the stones

I remember --
my mother combs her red hair
after giving me a bath
a photo of grandpa Brennan
in his County Sheriff's uniform
Aunt Ada, who married a Mexican
brags he was pure blooded *Toltec*
My father's voice drowns them out
like a flash flood in the desert

My heart whirrs like a frightened rabbit
I transfer her ashes
from a plastic urn to a *Cantaro*.
Her body purified by fire
pours hot through my fingers
reminding me she wanted the last word --
not to be buried next to him

More than forty years ago
after my father's funeral
my mother and I returned to the ranch
lit a bonfire, took down his pictures
Holding hands in silence
we watched the embers burn down

2

In search of the perfect stone
I go to Clonmacnois
kneel at the Cross of the Scriptures
and say a prayer for King Flann
son of Maelsechnaill and for Colman
the stonemanson who made the cross

At the Nun's Chapel
I pray to the goddess Brigid
sainted Sheela-na-Gig
who glares down from the portal
exposed pudenda
to remind us of where we came from

I follow ancient tracks
of *Tuatha De Danann*
who descended into earth
through fairy mounds
at *Tara* and *Ennian Macha*
and at Newgrange
the procession of *Ban Fis*
when Dagda the Sun God
penetrates the womb of earth

I crawl into the tombs
of Loughcrew and Carrowkeel
At Carrowmore I feel the heat
of a "soul egg" in my hand
--- a polished white stone
charged with the breath of a beloved
waiting to be released

3

As I place this stone
on my mother's grave
I think of my father
of blue skies and black bullwhips

how we hold to our fathers
through earth and fire
and the smell of bones

to our mothers
by the taste of earth
and the permanence of stone

THE MILL HAG

How beautiful she must have been
before she posed as Venus of Laussel
her face seen as swirls of light
essence beyond the profanity of body

Her name chiseled on cave walls
to the soft sounds of the word vulva
repeated as a Chinese calligrapher
might practice his ancient art

How beautiful she was as Tiamet
before she was betrayed by Marduk
before she became the white bull-goddess
and crossed the sea on a wave of fury

Before being cursed and betrayed
before she abandoned her own son
and cast the testicles of her seed-bull lover
into the lake at Navan

Before being hacked up
parts strewn to the four corners of earth
bones burnt and buried
under mounds of granite and greywacke

No tomb strong enough to hold her
she emerges with the tide
a demon rising from the sea
she reappears as vulture goddess
vagina dentate as our beloved
Sidhe Sile Sheela-na-Gig

Transformed into the Mill Hag
she chases Mad Sweeney
across the Muckish mountains
crashing into the cliff at Dunseverick

At the Nun's Chapel at Clonmacnois
her naked bird-frame body
glares down at me from above the doorway
legs spread wrapped around her head
and dragged from her rafter in Killua
a screeching plucked wet hawk
with a beak between her legs

When I found her hooded and chained
on a white pedestal behind an open door
I wanted to tuck her inside my shirt
and press her against the warmth of my belly

I think of my mother's rage
when I buried her charred remains
beside her tormentor
a ninety nine year old goddess
transformed by age and fire

Sesskilgrene

Standing stone. Sesskilgrene, Co. Tyrone, Ireland

Source: Megalithic Art in Ireland, Muiris O'Sullivan
Town House and Country House
42 Nirehampton Road
Donnybrook, Dublin 4, Ireland

SESSKILGRENE

Where is Sesskilgrene?
You're standing in it he says
while pumping gas
I mean the sacred stone

Oh, ay he says -
take the road back there
a sweep of the hand
past the second farm house

which may not be occupied
since Hackett's brother died last fall
go behind the barn
through the gate on the right

to the second field there
another gate
up on the hill in the middle
...you can't miss it

A single standing stone
unattended
but for a circle of cows
staring as if I have no right

I kneel before the grave
into damp earth
trace faded swirls and dots
with charged fingers

barely touching an eye
seeing a face
pocked with black lichen
perhaps the portrait of a goddess

top half rubbed smooth
from cows scratching their bums
I reach out to the cold stone
embracing her cries

THE TRIPLE GODDESS

Spirals on a stone placed upright half in half out
of the ground. Her vulva opens to embrace the seed
planted in her belly by the phallus beam of the sun.

Her body resonates with infusion of light,
expands in waves until she explodes in a ball of fire
leaving stretch-marks across the belly of sky.

She transforms from maiden to crone
passing through her mother phase in song.
Her music fades as we forget the words...

clouds turn into anvils and thunderheads,
forge the fear we use against the hag.
We chase her into the cliffs at Ailsa Craig

where her bones lie bleaching on rocks
until Brigid, sainted goddess of the sun,
appears at Mary's side, with three drops

from the holy well at Cill-Dare,
sprinkled on the head of the child Jesus,
converts the triple goddess to the Trinity.

At Candlemas, the wail of the Uilleann Pipe
mourns the loss of words to her song--
Brigid's snake spirals back into its mound

and a finger rubs the vulva of the Sheela-na-Gig
quickenning the womb of Death made fertile
as I place this stone on my mother's grave.

THE RUIN

The sun god, the goddess of the moon and the dark goddess of the crossways lived in an age before fire and ice. Before the first stone was planted in the sea off the coast of Donegal. First the stone and then the word. The word and then the stories. In the stories the sun god penetrates the womb of earth on a ramp of stone. Kings issue from caves and the light of the moon goddess is eternally eclipsed by the sun. Each kingdom lost to the sea.

Darwin stood on the edge of time and told what he saw. When I think of Darwin I think of Job. Both dared speak out in the face of God. I knew this truth in my father's rage but could not speak. The silence returns when I stand before the broken walls of a temple.

A ruin is a holograph of the history of man. What is hidden is known by the body.

First came the word, but the power of a word is in the silence that precedes it.

The gap between the first word and the history of earth is a wound of silence.

UNMARKED GRAVES

The earth grows heavy going west
green surrenders to bogs and rocks
clachans - tiny stone villages
abandoned fallen into ruins
the *Burren* a mountain of stone
adds weight to the land
its massive form echoed at sea
in the gray limestone body of Aran

On the island of Innishmore
inside the great circle of stone
I drop to all fours
crawl to edge of the cliff
look straight down
where the flat slab of earth breaks off
taking the dream of Dun Aonghosa
into the sea along with the wall

I hear prayers rendered in stone
walls linking father to son
mountains stripped of green
leaving bones of history
poking through worn out earth --
rubbled walls
in as many shapes as Irish words
for the sound of scattered stone
cloch, clochar, clochrach,

“With the sweat of his brow
with the blood of his heart
he will make land
out of the stone”.

*Le allas a bhaithis
Le fuil a chroi
Deanfaidh se talamh
As na scalprachai*⁹

¹ From a poem by Tomas O Direan.

Scalprechai - a green field recalimed from bare rock by spreading sand and seaweed.

CEIDE FIELDS

A rainy August on a hillside above Ceide
the Atlantic catches light in long rhomboid streaks moving
left to right across its smooth metal surface

The sun breaks through layers of low hanging clouds
illuminating first one field then another across the valley
hovering above one bright small square in the patchwork

walls of buried fields light up green like foot bones
seen through the lens of a shoe store fluoroscope
5000 years of history mummy-wrapped in a bog

A passing cloud of rain merges mid-air with the sea
on shore it licks placenta of flesh and bone
collapsing light years as in myth or study of stars

In my dream I approach shore standing in the prow
of the small wooden skiff unsteady as we land
greeted by men in sandals and black robes

Holy men who would explain my father to me
but I do not want to hear them
I want to walk up the mountain on bare feet

like a *castrato* leaving a trail of bloody footprints
to fling my manhood into a stranger's doorway
anger appeased by killing my father's seed

but on this hillside I choke on charged air
yearning to fall between the cracks of time
to re-enter that moment of grace

when my father's fathers built the first field
stone by stone a monument of 2500 acres
reaching as newborn earth to meet the sky

not knowing what went wrong nor what got lost
between the first farm and the last potato
between Ireland and Laredo

the wound of my father's barbed wire fences
stretched piano wire tight across Texas desert
one more crude stitching of that festered wound

Creac'h Quille

Burial place at Creac'h Quille, At the entryway, a stele carved with a pair of breasts and a necklace.

District of Saint Quai-Perros, Cotes d'Amor, France

CREC'H QUILLE

On the coast of St. Quay-Perros, the stones turn from gray to red granite. At dusk, the sun spreads a blush across the tomb of the goddess-mother. Her children are gone. They've forgotten her. Even their bones have washed away.

I feel shame
as I come upon the goddess
carved on the facing stone

dog turd at the entryway
temple stones unearthed
its covering mound worn away

she is naked
breasts and necklace
waiting to be addressed

WHAT TO SAY TO THE STONES

1.

After my mother's funeral, I walk among the twenty three graves in the family plot writing down names and dates. I try to remember the stories, to recall a face, a voice, but they are gone. The buzz of the cicadas grows louder. I touch my grandfather's stone to feel a vibration, a connection. Nothing. I take a pinch of fresh earth from my mother's grave and eat it.

The sun burns a hole through the yellow sky from the Mexican side of the river. I smell my childhood and shrink to my knees as when I dismounted at the end of a day's ride. I remember the bone drift in the dry creek where I buried my horse Albert. At night, the bones had eyes and danced.

Jacob believed his stone pillow was holy because of a dream.
His pillow was the cornerstone of Beth-El, the House of God.

In England, a Thunderstone is placed under the throne
of the King.

In Ireland, a stone is kept in the house to talk to when a
loved one dies.

I keep a picture of my mother and a pair of old boots
I wore when I rode.

2.

My mother let me touch the birthing scar I made, a four inch welt across her belly. Before I could talk, I made a vow to her but she never told me what it was. At her grave, when I touched her stone, I felt a burning on my cheek.

Now, I bow to enter the tumulus of Gavrinis. Twenty six engraved pillar-stones line the walls in a profusion of swirls. The dark passageway is an incision in the belly of earth.

The next morning
I start to write something
I think I understand about stone

at that moment
a blue bowl in the cupboard
explodes

3.

The goddess materializes from fragments of memory. Dots, circles, a vulva, the squatting body of a Venus giving birth, wasp-waist goddess with ringlet curls She explodes into shards, her energy transforms into menacing clouds of black rain. I stand silent before her rage

I recognize the voice of the goddess,
a string of sacrificial hearts around her throat.

I knew her when she had a herd of black goats
and danced with snakes.

When it rained, I caught water moccasins
and delivered them to her in a gunny sack.

She speaks of penalties for broken contracts
between absorber and emitter,

agreements sealed by mutual vibration,
as between a magnolia blossom and a bat.

4.

Near the sea, in the tumulus of Pierre Plates, I trace engravings on a pillar stone with a flashlight. Curves, meanders, a tablet of instructions. A labyrinth, a maze, a map for the journey to the next world. My footprints appear on the wall as I take a breath. The stones come alive as a song. Do I need to know the words?

The path is traced in the sand
the goddess erases half of it
requiring me to remember
the ritual dances

Am I the bull-leaper
who defies the Minotaur
the Hopi deer dancer
who eats the heart of his prey?

5.

At Carnac I follow a mile long alignment of megaliths feeling the weight of stones as they increase in size. At the top of the hill, I stand uneasy before the circle of stones. Nothing between them and bare earth, the altar open to the sky.

The earth fiery beneath my feet
as it pushes up to meet the sky

Are these the Olmec gods I knew as a child?
Does my grandfather Brennan stand trial here?

I learned when to twist the yellow gourd from its vine
to preserve the sweetness

And, how a desert holds the fragrance of a flower
and guards its seed for 100 dry years.

LAS MARIPOSAS

On the day of the dead
mariposas return
to the mountains of Michoacan
orange wings
beating to the rhythm of fire
a great procession
Tibetan Monks in saffron robes
winding from tree tops into the sun

In the sanctuary of El Rosario
a canopy of low hanging clouds
draped with a blazing tapestry
woven in full flight
our earth bound spell
led by butterflies
these spirits of the dead
leave a carpet of broken wings
strewn at our feet like petals

Before Conquistadores named the land
before mapping the Camino Real
monarchs built their own royal road
from the ice fields of Canada
south 2000 miles
to the valley of the fire gods
paved with the wings and dust
of their dead

And for 100 generations
of the millions that followed
not even one has yet made the journey
from beginning to end

LAS MARIPOSAS

En el día de los muertos
regresan las mariposas
a las montañas de Michoacán
anaranjadas alas
laten al ritmo de fuego
una gran procesión
de monjes Tibetanos en túnicas de azafrán
serpenteando las copas de los árboles
hacia el sol

En el refugio sagrado del Rosario
una bóveda de nubes bajas
cubierta con tapiz flamante
tejido en pleno vuelo
nuestro encuentro terrenal
guiado por estas mariposas
almas de muertos
que dejan alfombra de alas quebradas
echada como flores en la senda

Antes que los conquistadores
nombraran la tierra
antes que trazaran el Camino Real
los monarcas fundaron su propia vía regia
de los campos helados de Canadá
dos mil millas al sur hasta el valle
de los dioses de fuego
lo pavimentaron con alas y polvo
de sus muertos

Y por sin número de años
de los millones que lo siguieron
aun ninguno ha hecho el viaje
del principio al fin