

MANUEL BECERRA

FOREST CONCERT

It is a death-defying act by the children, who climb down the forest ravines. This place burns, gets a covering of villages, and at times quickens the fog. Into its density settles the sobriety of a man who dreams, feverish, about pails of water. In its green depths, as well, villagers make love out of anyone's sight.

There is a village under constellations. And a woman at the riverbank who has spent centuries washing the water's stillness.

And there is a harpist responsible for burning pathways. Under his purview are the instrumentation for Sonatas of water, Fados of clarity and summertime, Songs for adolescents smoking in a forest clearing.

Songs for adolescents smoking in a forest clearing, 2011

TOKYO

Do you still remember that short film
by Shōhei Imamura where a man, an imperial
soldier, returns from war and adopts the
ways of serpents, and once a serpent,
he begins to devour rodents and live
in rivers and towards the end he goes
crawling off through the calm blue waters
of a waterfall set up in the studio
and a woman shouts at him just before the fadeout:
“Did being a man disgust you that much?”

Instructions for killing a horse,
2013

CHRONICLE ABOUT PEOPLE WHO LOVE CATS

We know little of cats. We know that the cat's head is the size of a native rose and is similar in weight and volume to a child's closed fist. But we also know that the cat's face never exists in just one location.

While the cat stays sleeping in the hands of Grecia, my daughter, it is also sitting in the tree of a past life, drinking almond milk in a house in Istanbul, crossing toward vagrants on the other bank of the River Lethe, heaving out a hairball, or present as someone chisels its face into a sovereign's tomb.

Fable and Odyssey, 2019

ANOTHER SONG ABOUT THE WHALE

The whale is an ephemeral island. Above its back the whale shelters, like a brown crab, a cay for birds.

Within it a mangrove swamp revels then wilts in seconds as the skin of the sea springs up, twists, and smacks on its way back down.

The whale's heart is limestone, which every so often returns to boiling point.

The whale has a blowhole in its head exactly like a well in the hillside:
if the wellhead gets displaced, light becomes a possibility;

thereafter the moon discovers a bearded man inside
with a newspaper hat roasting a catfish over a campfire.

The man raises a flaming stick against the whale's night, and he illuminates the palate on
whose walls is written the history of stars.

His obscure Silicon ballad is as ancient as the earth's rotation.
Another kind of song exists, but it exists underwater.

In another life the whale was a cloud of thrush, a man who died under the sword.

Fable and Odyssey, 2019

IMITATION OF GAUGUIN —LAS VIGAS, VERACRUZ—

Among heavy equipment at the foot of the mountain, seekers pass dirt through sieves to pick out any hint of gold, but instead of gold, they find the women who go to cleanse themselves of love in the rivers, and in place of gold they will have found, before any goldmine, a herd of yellow bison. The youngest women work lather between their hands and garments as they clean. Their thighs are mahogany, and for a few moments the river enamels them. Fish nibble gently at their toes.

The women observe the miners and are discreet about what takes place underwater. The miners know that the women are preceded by a herd of yellow bison.

Fable and Odyssey, 2019

CHRONICLE OF STARS —VERACRUZ—

You can't cut a rose without altering a star. In this epiphany, a grandfather knows that the approaching comet will arrive and disrupt the growth of legumes, and it will cause the milk of bovines to sour.

Women with child will carry a melding of men and asses to the region.

The same thing occurred with the eclipse; a black sun kept roosters in a state of confusion. Beasts of burden tossed their heads, overwhelmed. It was like that. But tell me,

what are we, other than simple creatures, made to contemplate human beings and animals equally destroyed by the rules of heaven or that so-called music of the spheres?

If the star takes too long to burn up as it falls, those of us unconsciously touched by the sky will hasten famine and misfortune.

Fable and Odyssey, 2019

TALE ABOUT DONNA AND HER HORSE

“Inside him was an immeasurable well,” she said.
It was a story about love or something,
I’m not sure. A friend told it
and at the same time it was Donna’s story
and her summer gift
was a horse. Do you remember? It was about
a woman living in the north
who would say that every time
she took him back to the stable
some part of each one remained in the other
throughout the tourmaline night
and he seemed to smile radiantly
the next day with his giant teeth
of wood or for children, whichever,
and on his flanks he would feel
Donna’s solar thighs
and so the days spun like a
great wheel over the field but one day
a man showed up with a ring
and a great stone that he himself discovered among stones
and Donna indicated yes with her head and they married
and then something changed entirely
because between Donna and the horse
there was a language broken as asthma,
asthma from love as a Chilean would one day call it,
and he died because there were no more fences
to jump and there was no more woman for whom
to live in the hills, the hills
grew shorter and then
Donna said that, do you remember?
“Inside him was an immeasurable well...”
and she also said, “The heart breaks for
people but not for horses.”

Fable and Odyssey, 2019

THE SONG OF EMMETT TILL

I am Emmett Till and I'm fourteen years old.
I am – always – going back to Mississippi.
I like to look at landscape paintings:
I see my mother giving chase to a hen
to eat with all my brothers.
Carolyn Bryant lives here too,
a white woman silver in the moonlight.
One day in Mississippi I said to her: *Ciao, baby*.
It was a warm day and I was enjoying
the way the landscape looked like a photo negative:
blacks in fields of cotton.
I said *Ciao baby* to her in Mississippi
and then Big Milam, the boss,
came to my home to tell me off.
He took me out walking, like a prophet,
through Mississippi waters.
He gave it to me hard and with a stick
and then I didn't go home to my mother.
They searched for me under the bridges
which is where they search for blacks
and finally they found me there.
I am – always – going back home.
I'm Emmett Till between shells
and I live under a bridge on the Mississippi
where I'll always be fourteen years old.

Unpublished poem

(for the poet Horacio Castillo)

My mother had one white breast and one black breast.
 I drank transparent milk, the almond milk coming from my mother to satisfy me, but
 that wouldn't happen. Then
 my nanny would return from church and feed me her milk, dark and voluptuous;
 her hair came from Africa,
 the largest continent on earth. Africa
 and its geography, a stomach running parallel from Patagonia all the way to Canada.
 Maps don't do justice.
 My mother had one white breast and one black breast.
 She would feed me her milk, white as light in cotton fields,
 a sweet sickle cutting through lips. The sweetness of her breast seduced me, a breast like a
 huddled swan, but later it dried up rapidly
 and then she would pass me back to the nanny who presented her black breasts and gave me
 an exhausted drink: drink,
 she would say, this milk is dream with sound. And I would run toward that hutch, the obscure
 rabbit hole. It was bitter with sweat but provided me with life. I drank from it like a deer in
 frozen waters until midnight.
 My mother had one white breast and one black breast
 The day would open with hundreds of wings in the air and as her honeyed breast came near,
 she would say to me:
 drink my milk from the heifer in your line. But it didn't matter if I didn't do that, and then my
 mother would order the nanny to be brought from the barn again, the nanny whose deep
 breasts fortified the body's osseous flower, its infinite bones, and from the dark breast I drank
 ill-fated milk, avidly, rare milk, milk from a slave of old, and her eyes glittered in the night like
 the pretty raccoon.
 Her false teeth were a powerful sickle that dried up my mother's golden smile.
 My mother had one white breast and one black breast.

Unpublished poem

EMILY HOLDS HER FACE WITH ONE HAND

She's thirty years old and has gained some weight. She still has yellow eyes, unusual eyes, and
 upon her legs, her hands rest together – a different animal– and they are tanned; a carpenter's big
 hands that do not hold any myrtle: they removed the dirt and dug a furrow –the water tangles for
 a moment with the flow from the gutters --, they made it fertile with the unused runoff.
 This is the mechanism that led to their flowers.
 Her hair is red as the fox. who passes through leaving miniscule tracks on the clay, and who is not
 here anymore, similar
 to Emily, who in her time voyaged across the land without anyone noticing yet left a record of her
polar privacy.
 She has the look of a young mother:

nonetheless, in the oval of her mirrored hand, around its mottled silver, she looks at the Emily who is fragile as a hedgehog, the docile sybilline Emily who smiles
—not at the corners of her mouth but through her weary eyes—
with the mortal calm of ports facing imminent disaster.

Unpublished poem

MILL RIVER IS A FORESTED AREA THAT KEEPS A RIVER IN QUIET. As we enter, its motionless waters begin to flow again with the pace of milk and honey. Under the bridge some indecisive fish have stopped, attaining organs and visibility through the duel between light and shadow. Every stone bench, every path that leads to the river is dedicated to someone's memory. We came through a trail memorializing Jennifer Melnick. Who was she? So far one only knows that her name leads through a forest of dark vertebrae, a forest that allows the sun to warm it, high above the trees, a lattice circulating water and shadow. Undulations left by snakes crossing the dirt make fossil shapes. They will disappear – along with the ephemeral desire to honor someone's memory – just after we leave them behind. Jennifer Melnick's forest is in summer's hands. Summer watches over every corridor damaged by the sun, and every animal sleeping in the branches, like a newborn in its father's hands.

Unpublished poem

Translated from the Spanish by Kristin Dykstra
