

2018-01-01

# Brother Sleep

Aldo Amparan

*University of Texas at El Paso*, [aldo.amparan@gmail.com](mailto:aldo.amparan@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open\\_etd](https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd)

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Amparan, Aldo, "Brother Sleep" (2018). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 1396.  
[https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open\\_etd/1396](https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd/1396)

This is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UTEP. For more information, please contact [lweber@utep.edu](mailto:lweber@utep.edu).

BROTHER SLEEP

ALDO IVÁN AMPARÁN

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

---

Sasha Pimentel, M.F.A., Chair

---

Andrea Cote-Botero, Ph.D.

---

Sam Sax, M.F.A.

---

Charles Ambler, Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

Copyright ©

by

Aldo Iván Amparán

2018

## Dedication

*For my family in blood—  
my mother, Ofelia, my grandmother, Ofelia, and my aunt, Rebeca*

*& for Raul—  
my family in spirit.*

BROTHER SLEEP

by

ALDO IVÁN AMPARÁN, BA

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas at El Paso  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2018

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my enormous gratitude to Prof. Sasha Pimentel, for her patience, devotion, and outstanding mentorship, always passionate about the power of poetry. To Dr. Andrea Cote-Botero, for her wisdom and guidance, and her encouragement to travel the borders of language.

Thank you to the voices who have inspired these pages, and who have helped pave the road of my experience as a writer: Jericho Brown, Dennis Cooper, Patricia Smith, Ocean Vuong. But, most especially, thank you to sam sax for taking the time to read and discuss this manuscript as a member of my Committee of Readers.

Thank you to the Department of Creative Writing, especially Dr. Rosa Alcalá, Prof. Daniel Chacón, Dr. José de Piérola, and Prof. Lex Williford for their unwavering support.

And to my colleagues at the Bilingual MFA in Creative Writing, especially Mario Martz, Jorge Manzanilla, Francisco Barraza Alonzo, JJ Peña, Daniela Ruelas, Daniela Armijo, and Saul Hernández.

Finally, thank you to everyone who has offered their support while this book came into fruition: to my family and to Raul Hardin, this book is for you. And to Lidia Macias, Luis Alonso Araiza, Jorge Armando Hernández, and Esther Olivares.

## Preface

### *Sleep and Death*

In the song “Fratrem Mortis Est”, Anna-Varney Cantodea sings “Sleep is the brother of death.” I walked across campus one morning and heard this, not having paid attention to the rest of the lyrics in my stroll, but this single line surfaced from Cantodea’s vocals and lingered long after the song finished.

Originally, the idea stems from Greek mythology, in which Hypnos, the god of sleep, and Thanatos, the god of death, are twin brothers. Hesiod writes of their birth in his epic poem *Theogony*:

Night bore loathsome Doom and black Fate and Death, and she bore Sleep, and gave birth to the tribe of Dreams. Second, then, gloomy Night bore Blame and painful Distress, and the Hesperides, who care for the golden apples beyond glorious Ocean and the trees bearing this fruit. (211-216)

This fragment appeared as an epigraph in an earlier draft of *Brother Sleep*, but the awareness of thematic source, along with most persona poems in the voices of these mythical siblings (which, save for one, no longer appear in this draft), interfered not only with the collection’s sense of present, but with its need to strip away abstract theme and enter the urgency of a precise voice. However, Hesiod’s fragment served as a kind of “family tree” for the themes found in this collection, which revolves directly and indirectly around death—more specifically the different kinds of violence that affects the body, particularly a queer body and its familial relationships, which might lead it toward death.

“Puñal”, for instance, moves from the violence of insult in its first sequence, a Mexican derogatory term used for homosexuals, which also means, in its literal translation, “dagger”. The description of a hate crime in an alley in Ciudad Juárez makes the poem’s second section, though the victim is never named, thus making it possible to encompass all deaths by stabbing of homosexuals in the Mexican side of the border. And in its third section, the poem not only returns to the more personal voice of the first person speaker, but it also recounts the factual death, also by stabbing, of Erykha Tijerina, which occurred in 2016, in El Paso, TX. In this poem, death is present in immediate, literal form, but the speaker in “Glossary for What You Left Unsaid” (pg. 9), witnesses another, similar form of violence: “saw him again creased over the restroom sink, three other boys pressing // his face to the white porcelain while a fourth raked his blue // hair with a clipper” (11-13). Both the speaker and the boy he witnesses being bullied remain alive, but a sense of mortality is present throughout, from its first stanza: “He tints everything different blues, smears (a self-) // portrait with drowned skin. he didn’t intend to look this dead” (4, 5), to its last: “...throat like a tumor too large for both of us to breathe” (19).

In philosophy, the concept of living is often linked to motion, specifically motion in a body. Heidegger believed that not only the life in a body, but the body’s awareness of his definite mortality “...rests on the ontological reality of being an animate form of life among other animate forms of life” (Sheets-Johnstone, 556). With this in mind, Sleep’s relationship to his stern and much feared brother makes sense, and can be seen as a state of suspended living. Patricia Smith begins her poem “When Black Men Drown Their Daughters” with the lines: “There is not drunk like the drunk of milk sleep. / A drizzled white floods the body

and weighs down / everywhere we think we know about awake” (1-3), and from the beginning the body of a child is hindered with the stillness of sleep before it is plunged into the river, into the stillness of death. The relationship is further emphasized when sleep is induced by milk, a liquid, described as a “drizzled white [that] floods the body”, and death arrives at the bottom of a river, an actual flood.

In “Aubade at the City of Change”, death may be interpreted in a different sense, not as a definite cessation of life but as a transformation. Still, the speaker mourns, searching for the past self of his lover:

...I reach for you  
at the corners of the clubs, inside

motel rooms, the bodies  
of rent boys tumbling  
perspired bed sheets, doubling

you, the past  
maleness discharged  
out of you... (11-18)

The transitioning of the speaker’s lover, the shedding of her masculine body, is perceived by the speaker as a kind of end, something from the past he yearns for but cannot be retrieved, and thus enters in a way Heidegger’s concept of “being-towards-death”. The lover, then, is reborn in her new female form, yet the speaker, in his grief, falls asleep in the roads outside the city: “Tonight I’ll sleep / on this road, I’ll look back / to the city of change...” (30-32), therefore falling into a state of suspended living, of sleep induced by grief.

In *Brother Sleep*, the different kinds of violence aren't limited to outside aggressions. Another kind of violence can stem from within the body by way of illnesses. In her article "The Enigma of Being-Toward-Death", Maxine Sheets-Johnstone writes: "The interconnected lacuna and enigma are clearly evident in the existential reality of infants, who not only are without language but have no notion of finitude" (553). The speaker in "Inheritance" begins at this stage, but employs poetic language to describe the interaction with his mother. In the poem's progression, however, the speaker becomes aware of his own mortality: "...this vessel she holds / to the surface in time will shed / a mountain of scabs, stale rivers / of spit & urine..." (15-18), until finally the speaker faces the violence of her mother's degenerative illness, a cyclical reminder of our bodies' finitude.

Sleep's function in this collection, however, is not limited to that sense of suspended living. Dreams are also important to many of the poems herein, and they function as a mirror to the subconscious yearning and fears of the speakers. In "Interrogation of the Sodomite", for instance, sexual desire is exposed through dream at the face of society's disapproval of a sexuality outside its heteronormativity. In "Dream Journal: Long Letter for Lost Loves", and "Primer for a View of the Sea" dreams express the speaker's yearning for the past—the lost connection with past lovers, or the loss of a brother to illness.

Furthermore, it laces these poems with the poetic sentiment of the ethereal, that which Lorca calls *duende*, and which he defines, by way of Goethe, as this "mysterious power which all feel but no philosopher can explain." (107). Because, in his speech, Lorca links this deeply power to the unknown, to the concept of death (110), this collection finds *duende* not only in its themes, but in its technical portrayal of these themes, and within this deeply felt

but nearly indefinable power, too, can rest that which is often left unsaid, the sentiment that language cannot explicitly describe, except, perhaps, in poetry.

### *When Language Fails Us*

Language constructs poetry: the voice, the tone, the music, and most importantly, imagery. Take the exact moment when you wake up: the slow opening of the eyelids, the room coming in blurry and slowly taking form, the cool linen brushed against your skin when you turn and adopt a new position in your bed. These are all sensory elements that make you understand the world around you. Images anchor the mind to this world. The mind, without anchoring, scatters thoughts, remains air. But there are certain elements in said moment of waking that cannot be expressed through imagistic language. How to describe that small sensation left from a dream you cannot remember upon waking? That specific moment between unconsciousness and awareness? These are the moments that lift language into poetry; moments with Lorca's *duende*, where imagery and abstraction can push each other to explore that which language struggles to describe.

Readers are generally able to grasp the concepts of ideas, but without image, it is impossible to experience them, and without experience, the vast ambition of poetry is limited to the intellect. We teach beginning poets to rid their work of abstractions because, as poets, we seek to build an experience—a visceral understanding of the idea by linking it to the tangible world.

Image is strongly related the body and the world around it, for it is through the body that we experience the world. Physicality and the specificity of corporal functions, movement, and sensation are all crucial in poetry. They ground the reader to what is familiar, and a poem is always accessed easier through this familiarity. Take, for example, Sharon Olds' poem "The Last Day":

*"The last day* of my father's life  
they bathed him in the morning, they drew the sheet down to his waist  
and I sat with them and they washed him, clavicle,  
shoulder, chest, ribs, the grainy  
ochre skin, I looked out the window at the  
folded California mountains..." (1-6)

From the second line, the poem is filled with actions of the body: the bathing and drawing of the sheets: the washing, and we are instantly aware of bodies and their interactions solely by Olds' use of verbs. But then the poem delves deeper into the subject's physicality, zooming in, and we are no longer focused on the actions alone, but on their concreteness. It is not washing alone, but the washing of the father's clavicle, his shoulder, chest, and ribs. The image becomes clearer and clearer with the recognition and listing of the body's anatomy.

Olds zooms further in by using adjectives when it is necessary. She intensifies the already visceral image by describing the father's skin as grainy and ochre, and only when the poetic lens has zoomed in to such a specific part of the subject's body does Olds give in, zooming out and allowing readers space by describing the setting the speaker sees outside the window. Olds does not, however, zoom out completely, and retains a small sense of physicality by describing the mountains as "folded".

This focus on image and the simplicity of language to portray such image in poetry stems back to the Imagist movement, lead by Erza Pound. In a treatment, Pound enlists “A Few Don’ts” for poets beginning to delve into this then rising school of poetry, one of which states:

Go in fear of abstractions. Do not retell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose. Don’t think any intelligent person is going to be deceived when you try to shirk all the difficulties of the unspeakably difficult art of good prose by chopping your composition into line lengths. (201)

This is perhaps one of the better advices when it comes to the basis of poetic voice. However, there are some of the best instances in poetry where abstraction plays a crucial part to arrive at the poem’s core. I have examined the tangible, visceral images found throughout five out of the first six lines in Olds’ poem, which have completely appealed to the senses. Yet the poem’s opening line lacks this kind of precise imagery. Instead, it places the poem in a timeline, in the life of the most important subject. The language is simple, matter-of-fact, and there is no clearer way to state, whether it is through image or through abstraction, what the poem’s first line affirms: the speaker’s father died that day.

After the single opening line, Olds’ poem never lets go of its use of concrete image. The poem becomes almost jarring in its precise description of the sickly body and the details of the body at its moment of passing: “The sides of his tongue / were dotted with little lentils of pus / smooth as discs fashioned by art or science...” (29-31) and “He took a delicate breath / small as a baby’s sigh and we stood and waited / for the next breath” (49-

51). Olds doesn't stop here. She pushes the image of the body at the point beyond its death, always remaining in the physical world despite the great loss just experienced by the speaker:

“I laid my hand on his chest and I  
looked at him, at his eyelashes and the  
pores of his skin, cracks in his lips,  
dark rose-red inside the mouth,  
springing hair deep in his nose, I  
moved his head to set it straight on the pillow,  
it moved so easily, and his ear,  
gently crushed in the last hour,  
unfolded in the air.” (71-79)

Throughout the poem Olds retells, using imagistic language, the idea stated in the first line as if the first line were a thesis statement eventually expands on. This line is crucial because it allows the reader to arrive at the poem's risk from the very beginning. Everything that comes after: the slow intake of images, is informed by the initial knowledge of grief.

The physical body and the concrete world are also crucial in my work, in many cases serving as grounding, allowing the poems to later rise beyond the physical. “Puñal”, for instance, begins in this grounding: “I hang at the back of the school ground, my fingers hooked / to the chain-link fence facing the street, tips white // with my body's weight” (1-3). The image is brief and precise, and it zooms in gradually. The speaker forms a vague image of his body hanging, which by itself creates a vague image, the word “hanging” working in our minds both in the figurative level—hanging out at the school ground—but also alludes to the poem's core risk: the image of lynching. The image, then, zooms into the speaker's fingers, becoming clearer when the speaker describes even the white tips of the fingers.

Beyond the imagistic, and beyond that which can only be said in abstraction to encompass the gravity of it, there's another kind of feeling: a certain vastness that words cannot explain fully: that moment between dream and reality, for instance, or the empty space left by a forgotten memory. How then does poetry accomplish the task to describe what language fails to describe?

In another poem, "Sex Without Love", Sharon Olds writes: "How do they come to the / come to the come to the God come to the" (10, 11). Not only does the repetition conjure desire. It creates a rhythm, a sound playing in that last stand at the edge, where pleasure reaches its peak, where the last pause and holding of breathe created by enjambment gives way to release: "still waters, and not love/ the one who came there with them..." (10, 11).

There are other ways to bring forth this element of otherness that's so hard to explain but so crucial for the experience of poetry. In another of his guidelines, Pound writes:

Don't use such an expression as "dim lands of peace." It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the adequate symbol. (202)

Pound's criticism makes complete sense in the expression he has chosen, but at times attaching an image to a necessary abstraction justifies and clarifies its existence in a poem. "I wear my undoing like a mask," writes Safiya Sinclair in her poem "Prayer Book for Vanishing", and because the poem is speaking about the erasure of a speaker's identity—the

color of her skin, and ultimately her own self—the word “undoing” becomes vital to the poem’s core, brought forth to an imagistic grounding by making such abstraction a “mask”.

In my poem, “Glossary for What You Left Unsaid” (p.14), an image is attached to the overbearing weight that is depression: “I carry a sadness like a sibling in my arms, // & though I feel the weight unhinging // humerus from scapula, I bare it...” (31-33). By personifying depression as the speaker’s brother, the speaker creates a visual representation of the restrictiveness of his affliction, the immobility, and how close the feeling is to his person, a brother he cannot let go, a brother that won’t let go when the speaker tries to: “I hear my mother calling & my brother // shoves harder against me” (38-39).

It is poetry’s task to make noticeable that which language fails to communicate. Language itself has given poets the precise tools to do so: the power of repetition, the precise use of imagery, and, when everything else fails, that one utterly necessary metaphor, or that one abstraction which defies any kind of concrete descriptor.

### *Past / Present / Future*

I am sitting at the kitchen table scribbling nonsense notes on a pad. My grandmother clears out cabinets and my mother cooks patoles on the stove. Incense sticks burn somewhere in the living room. My grandmother takes out box after box of old artifacts, unused for years: empty picture frames, a set of tea cups, a black rotary-dial telephone. It’s the smell of incense and this last item that brings back the day my grandfather died.

This how I end up writing “Elegy With a Dial-Up Connection”, one of several poems in *Brother Sleep* that stems from memory. Though as much as it begins with reality, the poem is far from being autobiographical. In his essay, “My Grandfather's Tackle Box: The Limits of Memory-Driven Poetry,” offers two main principles I’ve greatly considered while writing *Brother Sleep*. Collins writes:

The key risk in writing the memory-driven poem is a failure to take advantage of the imaginative liberty that poetry offers. A poem suffering from such a disadvantage wanders around in the past and may amount to little more than a record, an entry in the log of the self’s journey, a fond reminiscence, a photo in a family album, or worse, a carousel of color. (281)

When writing a poem that originates from an actual remembrance in this collection, the autobiographical detail is deeply embedded into the imaginative elements of the poem. This also functions the other way around. In the essay, Collins refers to Richard Hugo’s concept of trigger, or, a subject that propels the poem forward, and treasure, a “subject discovered along the way” (281). To me, the imaginative and the autobiographical elements may function as the trigger and treasure, sometimes interchangeably depending on how they are expressed in the poem’s language.

The aforementioned “Elegy With a Dial-Up Connection” begins in an imagined present and travels, through flashbacks to actual memory: “...I was not home. I clustered / alone in the cool of a movie theater, Grandfather’s / yelling hot in my mind” (18-20). However, as much as the memory pains the speaker and the speaker’s grandmother, the treasure, the risk, Lorca’s *duende*, they all lie in the poem’s present, for in the present is the

absence, the yearning, and that deep sense of otherworldliness. It is in this present when the speaker states:

...I want to believe  
    she is gifted, that this disembodied voice  
        is my grandfather calling  
  
out of some diminutive rift in our physical realm  
    binding this cluttered room to the unknowable... (8-10)

Along these lines, Collins calls for poetry to “escape its own past setting” (283), which is the second principle I take from this essay into my own aesthetic, for when a poem remains in the realm of remembrance, it “never leaves the confines of the past, never achieves the kind of escape velocity that would propel it into another, more capacious dimension” (281-82).

Ocean Vuong’s poem “Homewrecker” begins with memory, but finds a way to break free from constraints of its past setting. Its first lines: “& this is how we danced: our mothers’ / dresses spilling from our feet...” (1, 2) places the speaker in an indefinite present by the use of “is”, a present in which the speaker looks back to the past times of his boyhood and his early experiences with queerness and homophobia. In this poem, the risk, which can be described as “the dangers of being,” rises from these past recollections: “When our lips touched the day closed / into a coffin” (7, 8). The past tense is then interrupted with the present tense in the sentence that follows: “In the museum of the heart / there are two headless people building a burning house.” This present not only increases danger because of its setting in time, but with its use of imaginative space and metaphor, creating a setting

that transcends physical terrain. Eventually, Vuong’s language transcends its setting in present and the past by its use of fragments:

Always another hour to kill—only to beg some god  
to give it back. If not the attic, the car. If not the car,  
  
the dream. If not the boy, his clothes. If not alive,  
put down the phone. (11-14)

Even though these fragments function in relation to a sentence beginning in the past, they become timeless through fragment and Vuong’s use of the word “always”. The sentence that follows reinforces this: “Because the year is a distance / we’ve traveled in circles” (14, 15). It alludes to the cyclical nature of violence against queer bodies, the utterly tragic normalization of such violence by repetition, by having to conform to this lack of safety, or, in the words of Vuong’s poem, to love with “a knife on the tongue turning / into a tongue” (17, 18).

Temporality in poetry isn’t always positioned in the past or the present. It can also, at a point, jump into the future. Philip Levine accomplishes this in his poem “Gin”, in which a speaker recounts the first time he and a group of friends try alcohol. This rite of passage symbolically marks the end of their innocence:

...the three boys  
had to empty themselves of all  
they had so painfully taken in  
and by means even more painful  
as they bowed by turns over  
the eye of the toilet bowl  
to discharge their shame. (58-64)

Because the poem already speaks directly about the boys’ future, about the desire to grow up, it allows for this jump to happen organically: “Ahead / lay cigarettes, the

futility /of guaranteed programs of / exercise...” and in this, Levine creates a list of events or actions that are to come in the lives of these boys. He continues: “...the elaborate lies / of conquest no one believed, / forms of sexual torture and /rejection undreamed of” (64-70). The list creates a sense of speed, reinforcing the fast forwarding of time as we move further ahead into the boys’ future. And each of the items in the list bears a risk higher than the one before it, raising the tension as the words pushes readers forward.

My poem “Inheritance” functions in a similar manner. It begins with the first person point of view of an infant, in the present, being bathed by his mother: “She brushes / the crown over my temples, / black fur now white / with foam” (9-12). The descriptions remain anchored to the body of the speaker and his mother, and it is through that physicality that the poem jettisons from that specific present to the future:

...this vessel she holds  
to the surface in time will shed  
  
a mountain of scabs, stale rivers  
of spit & urine, a dust storm  
  
of dead cells, my bones spreading inside  
the tented meat of muscle & tendon,  
  
skin unfurling like my mother’s... (15-22)

The poem also employs a list to create a sense speed, yet the list functions more of a description for some kind of metamorphosis: the changes the speaker’s body throughout the years, as if fast forwarding the tape of his life. Eventually the poem ends in a recognizable scene: the speaker and his mother in bathtub, only this time the speaker is older, bathing the mother. As with Vuong’s “Homewrecker”, “Inheritance” closes with a cycle as the reader faces the way time changes ones’ bodies.

### *White Space and What is Left Unsaid*

As I previously stated, one of poetry's tasks is to communicate that which language fails to communicate. But language is not always the precise tool poets use to do so. Many times, the best approach to portray these devastating truths is through silence. In a poem's page, silence inhabits whitespace. Lorca says "the arrival of the Duende presupposes always a radical change in all forms" (111). In free verse, whitespace is one of the elements that can be affected by changes of form. These changes, however, need to happen for a reason other than simple experimentation or game of style. If taken to face value, Lorca's statement makes complete sense: a change in all forms, specifically poetic forms are warranted in the arrival of the Duende.

In "Some Notes On Organic Form", Denise Levertov writes "...content and form are in a state of dynamic interaction; the understanding of whether an experience is a linear sequence or a constellation raying out from and in to a central focus or axis, for instance, is discoverable only in the work, not before it" (422). I believe this to be of extreme importance when working with either free-verse or traditional form: a sonnet needs to be a sonnet when the content demands so. The modern sonnet, however, can juggle both elements of traditional and organic form. Such is the case with my poem "Interrogation of the Sodomite", a modern sonnet that uses the form's two core principles: that it be composed of fourteen lines, and that it possesses a volta somewhere in its lines. Because the poem merges issues from the past and the present—the penalization of homosexuality in

1901's Mexico, and the death penalty for sodomy in several modern day countries (specifically Saudi Arabia), the volta serves as a perfect element to utilize in order to transmit the poem's core risk. Whitespace, however, plays a key part in displaying the difficulty the speaker has in communicating such words, as it cuts through each line, allowing for silence to interrupt language:

...Tadpoles shot out my eyes in my sleep. Asked how I could dream

6.  
of men, their waltzing legs, the 41 sharp cheeks blushing in the candle

7.  
-lit dark, in Mexico, the 41 abdomens soaking a river with their shame

8.  
-less loving, I bit out my tongue, which shot in its silence to bruise and bloody

9.  
a loving

10.  
man's forehead... (5-10)

After a reading, someone approached me with the suggestion to remove the numbering between lines. However, I believe breaking the lines of the sonnet into their own sections has a profound effecting in the way the lines are read. Not only does the numbering create additional interruption, working alongside whitespace, but it also propels the reader forward, enhancing the urgency of the words, especially when whitespace beings to swallow the text as lines become smaller and smaller within the sonnet's volta.

Ocean Vuong expertly utilizes the power of whitespace in his poem "Seventh Circle of Earth", which looks like this:

And the actual lines of the poem appear as footnotes:

1. As if my finger, / tracing your collarbone / behind closed doors, / was  
enough / to erase myself. To forger / we built this house knowing / it won't  
last. How / does anyone stop / regret / Without cutting / off his hands? /  
Another torch (1-12)

With the use of an epigraph, Vuong lets us know the poem speaks about the murder by immolation of a gay couple in Dallas, TX. Because the content requires such silence, such absence, Vuong allows whitespace to completely eradicate the language from the poem's form, only allowing it to appear as footnotes. Because in the silence of the page's blankness is the unspoken depth of the poem's risk: how the speaker's life, in this case taking the voice of one of the actual victims, was silenced as well.

## Works Cited

- Collins, Billy. "My Grandfather's Tackle Box: The Limits of Memory-Driven Poetry." *Poetry*, vol. 178, no. 5, 2001, pp. 278–287. *JSTOR*, *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20605395](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20605395).
- Cruz, Juan. "Game and Theory of the Duende." *Aferall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 3, 2001, pp. 107–111. *JSTOR*, *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20711427](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20711427).
- Olds, Sharon. "Sex without Love." *The Iowa Review*, vol. 12, no. 2/3, 1981, pp. 264–264. *JSTOR*, *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20155717](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20155717).
- Olds, Sharon. "The Last Day." *Agni*, no. 29/30, 1990, pp. 125–127. *JSTOR*, *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/23008700](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23008700).
- LEVERTOV, DENISE. "SOME NOTES ON ORGANIC FORM." *Poetry*, vol. 106, no. 6, 1965, pp. 420–425. *JSTOR*, *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/40732772](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40732772).
- Levine, Philip. "Gin." *What Work Is*, Knopf, 1991.
- Pound, Ezra. "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste." *Poetry*, vol. 1, no. 6, 1913, pp. 200–206. *JSTOR*, *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20569730](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20569730).
- Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine. "The Enigma of Being-Toward-Death." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 29 no. 4, 2015, pp. 547-576. *Project MUSE*, [muse.jhu.edu/article/603370](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/603370).
- Sinclair, Safiya. "Prayer Book for Vanishing." *Cannibal*, University of Nebraska Press, 2016, pp. 57–59.

Smith, Patricia. "When Black Men Drown Their Daughters." *Incendiary Art*, TriQuarterly Books, 2017, pp. 56–69.

Sopor Aeternus and the Ensemble of Shadows. "Fratrem Mortis Est." *Es reiten die Toten so schnell*, Geffen, 2003.

Vuong, Ocean. "Homewrecker." *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Copper Canyon Press, 2016, pp. 32.

Vuong, Ocean. "Seventh Circle of Earth." *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Copper Canyon Press, 2016, pp. 41–42.

## Table of Contents

Dedication .....	iii
Acknowledgments .....	v
Preface.....	vi
Sleep and Death.....	vi
When Language Fails Us .....	x
Past / Present / Future .....	xv
White Space and What is Left Unsaid .....	xx
Works Cited .....	xxiii
1:.....	1
Aubade at the City of Change.....	2
Puñal.....	4
Inheritance.....	7
Glossary for What You Left Unsaid.....	9
Elegy With a Dial-Up Connection .....	10
Little Deaths.....	12
Glossary for What You Left Unsaid.....	14
2:.....	19
Thanatophobia, or Sleep Addresses His Brother, Death.....	20
Interrogation of the Sodomite .....	22
Dream Journal: Obituaries for the Unnamed.....	24
Self-Portrait of the Stolen Body .....	25
Portrait of Child With Fruit & Rot .....	28
Glossary for What You Left Unsaid.....	31
I'm afraid doctors will tell me the MRI shows:.....	32
Sinner .....	33
Dirge of the Removed Lung.....	34

14th Birthday at Harlem .....	35
at Har m .....	37
Glossary for What You Left Unsaid.....	39
3:.....	41
Primer for a View of the Sea.....	42
1. Diagnosis: Mesa, AZ, 2002.....	42
2. Puncture: San Diego, CA, 1996.....	44
3. Dream Journal: Ciudad Juarez, MX, 2004 .....	45
4. Shore Sight: Matamoros, MX, 2015 .....	46
5. Sea Sight: Matamoros, MX, 2003.....	47
4:.....	48
Glossary for What You Left Unsaid.....	49
Dream Journal: Prayer Book.....	50
The Hierophant .....	53
Watching a Cartel Snuff Film With My Brother .....	54
Glossary for What You Left Unsaid.....	55
Los Olvidados.....	56
Sleep, Brother,.....	58
Blue Insomnia .....	60
Dream Journal: Long Letter for Lost Loves.....	67
After—.....	68
Notes.....	69
Vita .....	70

1:

## Aubade at the City of Change

In this city each door I cross  
in search of your room grows  
darker than the sky outside,

this silver dome of morning spread  
across the urban smog. Country  
dark washes the city light off

the outskirts and beyond  
where you sleep in hiding,  
where your face wrapped

in gauze shines like sequins  
in the lingering moon-drizzle. I reach for you  
at the corners of the clubs, inside

motel rooms, the bodies  
of rent boys tumbling  
perspired bed sheets, doubling

you, the past  
maleness discharged  
out of you. I remember hip bones sticking

to my thighs, hard stubble  
of your legs scratching  
against me. The night

of your transition I followed  
a foreign road looking  
to forget all this. Starlight

spooled the gravel ribbon leading back  
to the city behind me, back  
to the hospital room

where I last saw you, your body  
a strangeness to my hands, your skin

slick with hormones. Tonight I'll sleep  
on this road, I'll look back to the city

of change, where in one year

two skyscrapers lifted,  
a park shed its trees  
for new thoroughfares,

& an old cinema burst open  
to rebuild itself in its place. I'll stay  
on this pavement, suspended

in time like the broken sign  
announcing *You are*

*entering* \_\_\_\_\_, (a name  
changed two years ago), and I'll wonder  
if the hot breeze blowing

against the nape of my neck  
is your unchanged breath rising like candle  
smoke from the city.

## Puñal

i.

I hang at the back of the school ground, my fingers hooked  
to the chain-link fence facing the street, tips white

with my body's weight. The oak tree behind me bends  
down further each day I visit it to smear my mind

on its bark. Armando walks by the basketball field,  
spots me. He's surrounded by boys. He approaches

me slow as a hyena & I stab the lonely tree  
with another question. Armando spits on the blacktop, yells

*Puñal*—dagger,  
faggot, a word

that doubles his voice, that deepens the space  
between two countries, this border separating

him from the likes of me. The boys behind him  
whistle, laughing. One of them stabs

himself in the chest with an invisible knife, a gesture  
that echoes the word of my erasure. It's afternoon, early

dark, & before them the oak tree kneels a little lower.

ii.

In Ciudad Juárez, always, air tastes bitter with copper,  
coins roll on the mouth, stick to the throat  
of passers-by, hot air rusted and rustling as they push  
their way through the city. Downtown another body  
drops onto the night, the alley luminous wet, his stomach  
decked with seven slashes the color of Venus, seven wet  
mouths speaking foreign tongues: how the boy walked  
barefoot across La Mariscal, sidewalk broken  
into beer bottles, how the boy walked, how  
his whole body waved that curious  
way & he wore his wavy hair down his shoulders, hair  
an oil slick in the concrete mouth of the alley.

iii.

On August 8, 2016, Anthony Michael Bowden, 21, a soldier of Fort Bliss, stabbed 36-year-old Erykah Tijerina to death.

When she learned I'd grow  
to love a man, my grandmother prayed  
nine rosaries, brown beads  
digging the back of her hands,  
new moles for me not to  
end like Erykah, in the *El Paso*  
*Times*, which is to say *a man*  
*in women's clothes*, found  
by her stepfather in her apartment, her  
torso bursting apertures, 24  
red orchids rising out of her  
skin. I touched my grandmother's  
back that night, knelt  
beside her, the evening news  
in the white background  
& my grandmother's murmured  
faith effacing each other into noise.

## Inheritance

Mother's hair bundled in the sunken  
corner of the bathtub, fed

to the drain, the strand of her youth, her wish  
to preserve it. She extinguishes

a candle with water, sizzle rising  
to my eardrum. She says

her hair brimmed before my birth.  
*Ladronzuelo*, she calls me. I'm still

a child in her arms. *Desvergonzado*. She brushes  
the crown over my temples,

black fur now white  
with foam. She washes

my light casket of flesh, the growing  
organ, harvest of her body;

this vessel she holds  
to the surface in time will shed

a mountain of scabs, stale rivers  
of spit & urine, a dust storm

of dead cells, my bones spreading inside  
the tented meat of muscle & tendon,

skin unfurling like my mother's  
hair sucked

into the gutter. Organ of my heart  
speeding & slowing. I take

my first step, ride my first bike, learn  
to drive a car. To crash

into strangers 'til they're no longer  
strangers & one

night I'll slip  
back into my family

home, my own  
hair scarce, to bathe

my mother, lift her  
in the blurring of her mind

to the surface of hot water.  
I'll foam white

her small crowning, brush  
her shoulders between the spasms

of her waking, her eyes  
watching me

one more time  
before they sink

back to the black  
waters in her head.

## Glossary for What You Left Unsaid

### **art, *n.*<sup>1</sup>**

the boy keeps (to himself) in lunch periods, inside the unstirred  
classroom maneuvering wet brushes over his off-white  
canvas. he tints everything different blues, smears (a self-)  
portrait with drowned skin. he didn't intend to look this dead,  
his eyes stitched, everything wavering under water, water-  
color his whole (self). a month before

### **art., *n.*<sup>2</sup>**

you saw the boy kiss another boy in the hall. two weeks later, you

### **† art, *v.*<sup>1</sup>**

saw him again creased over the restroom sink, three other boys pressing  
his face to the white porcelain while a fourth raked his blue  
hair with a clipper. you hoisted there, listened  
to their laughs, the buzz, the sink's screech underneath the boy's  
blue fingernails his hands collapsed to the side of his  
hips, submitting to that loss of identity, your own  
hands fisted, a taste expanding your palate, the licorice  
stain the tongue you last kissed, quiet kept deep in your  
throat like a tumor too large for both of us to breathe

## Elegy With a Dial-Up Connection

*For Martín Amparán*

In bad days, my grandmother still hears his voice  
in the quiet kitchen. I find her speaking to the dark, sometimes  
tenderly, sometimes cracked in a fit of rage, asking him  
for one more day in which his voice  
booms not from the air but from the face she recognizes  
in old photographs in our living room. I want to believe  
she is gifted, that this disembodied voice  
is my grandfather calling  
out of some diminutive rift in our physical realm  
binding this cluttered room to the unknowable, not  
just a glitch in her brain invoking the echo of old  
memories— (once I turned the light on & found her  
staring at the unhooked phone, the receiver's hum  
gyrating from its cord down the kitchen table. Grief  
deepened the creases in her forehead & I wondered  
if it was for the light vanishing my grandfather's shadow,  
or if the black telephone took her back to the day  
of his dying— [I was not home. I clustered  
alone in the cool of a movie theater, Grandfather's  
yelling hot in my mind. I was not home  
when Grandmother heard the clout in the bathroom  
& found Grandfather crumpled in the searing shower,  
his fingers white against the loft of his stomach  
clasping his heart from dropping  
into sections— {how it had been crumbling the afternoon  
I'd fought back his disapproval, his voice drilling holes  
in my nape, his voice— *muy joven pa' saber lo que es bueno  
para ti*— } I was not home  
when she picked up the phone & encountered the brittle

noise of connection, tried, still, to dial an emergency, to rift  
the chaos of the digital world, white noise  
that devoured my grandfather.

She ran, finally, into the street, the whetted wind, her eyes  
bled by sunlight, stopped the traffic, crying—  
I was not home the phone unhooked the pulse  
of the line—. Today

I sit in the still shade of the kitchen, Grandmother's  
incense disintegrating smoke. I inhale it, gaze at its seam  
hover into the ceramic tiles, & I listen to the dark  
for the rasp in my grandfather's voice.

## Little Deaths

1.

In the dark screening,  
a play of hands, your fingers.  
Blossoms in his jeans.

2.

Holy water: what cold  
river, our shared bed. Blessing  
of your boyhood sleep.

3.

The alley behind  
the theater will do. Broken  
bricks. Bruised sky. His face.

4.

Seven missed calls. A  
voice message you erase. A  
man stirring in your bed.

5.

Gossip: your neighbor + died last week while having sex + with a woman.

6.

Colonies multiply inside you. A temple arches. A rock

7.

formation    inside your veins    absorbs white

light, your veins    bursting seams.

8.

You watch his sperm die  
on your hand. He speaks. All you  
hear: underwater noise.

9.

Gossip: the woman + was not your neighbor's wife.

She + wore blue stockings to the funeral.

10.

You play with yourself  
again, play yourself into  
a ditch, believe love

where only lust can blossom, the O  
in another man's face, his bareback

11.

promise of the ever-  
after. Lick everything spilled from his quaking

tongue, his word obliterated  
in your wake— the sore cheek, the empty bedside.

12.

Gossip: The woman might've been your  
cousin your + sister your + mother + might've been

13.

the moon guiding home  
a lost ship, the black sea waves,  
the hum of your hips.

## Glossary for What You Left Unsaid

† mad, *n.*

A maggot whispered in my ear a love story about the corpse it bore into, the yellow stomach, the love-making of worms. I listened

because everyone else talks in circles. My mother, especially, keeps singing the tired lyrics of a lullaby. I tell you the maggot's tale

& you shake your head. You tell me David Berkowitz claimed his dog commanded him to kill. Wouldn't stop talking 'til the bullets.

Only time maggots asked anything of me, I mounted the side of my house to the rooftop. The shingles shimmered. The moon

was round as a yellow stomach. I wanted to fly, but knew I wasn't a bird. At the institute, a woman who spoke to humming

-birds said she'd soon become one, little fire-necks bright outside her window told her so, green-chested Colibri flapping their wings

invisible. I took a pill & everything sunk into silence. I took another & hated the world & my place—

**mad, n.**

The poet writes about madness: *A maggot whispered in my ear...*

**mad, *adj.***

What the poet failed to consider:

1.

In his private, religious high school, a pastor recounted the story he saw on the news about a woman who burned alive her new born triplets in the oven & woke up, as if from a trance, to find their tiny charred corpses. The pastor used this story attempting to prove the existence of the devil.

2.

1979: David Berkowitz admits his claims of demonic possession were a hoax.

3.

When his first lover forced him to pace

downtown, their hands clasped & wet,

the poet itched with stares & the cracks

of revolving necks, necks

shaking in disapproval, a sound

of interlocked cogwheels. Weeks

after, he crosses the bridge to El Paso,

the sound of rotating

flesh still trailing his steps, his hand red

inside his pocket.

4.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, women who spoke to animals or inanimate objects were burned at the stake.

5.

Then, there's proof of the devil

6.  
& a cogwheel snaps:

7.

I carry a sadness like a sibling in my arms,  
    & though I feel the weight unhinging  
humerus from scapula, I bare it, offer my  
    bastard brother's scalp the curve  
of my throat. Mornings I condense  
    back into the world. His concretion  
fastens my extremities to the mattress.

    I hear my mother calling & my brother  
shoves harder against me.

8.  
At once, walls bawl  
louder than smoke:  
same noise as an open  
window in a speeding  
car: people shouting  
from the avenue:

9.

*You're not allowed to eat today:*

    My navel shattered the mirror.

*Your mother doesn't like you:*

    I engraved a sonnet on my calf.

*You're not allowed to feel:*

Keep turning the same

*Your grandmother doesn't like you:*

Damn words

*I saw you kiss & it made me sick:*

Bludgeoning my longest

*Your brother didn't like you:*

& last artery.

10.

Such small madnesses: I've written 7 suicide notes, one for each year after you died, each ending in apology.

11.

& again, there's proof of the devil.

12.

Another cogwheel churns: my mother—the poet's mother—said *you are mad* said *you are mad* says—

13.

I'm sorry.

2:

## Thanatophobia, or Sleep Addresses His Brother, Death

Night the world boiled. Men  
tossed with sleeplessness  
inside their sheets like stars.

Because I'd looked down.  
Because a man held his only son  
amongst the spillage

of buildings. & children  
sitting on debris,  
after the bombs, bodies,

cast their shadow  
to the stones. The boy hung  
from his father's arms, a hand folded

to his open neck, his open eyes  
cold nickels looking past me,  
past the sheet of white

linen. How terrible  
the fabric when it veils  
the end. How terrible

the night for him, the sleepless,  
Brother. When an American soldier  
swallowed a grenade that burst

as it slipped down his throat, a Mexican  
immigrant, a woman beaten  
half to death for stealing

a pomegranate, broke  
the fruit's skin open, red  
from her wounds

like the insides of the fruit,  
or the insides of the soldier,  
& doctors put to sleep

a girl to replace her heart with a new  
beating. Soon, that artificial  
sleep turned the same terrible

fabric. Her mother  
stood quiet as a desert in the hall  
admiring Wojnarowicz's "Untitled

(*Buffalo*)," that great beast at the edge  
of the photograph suspended  
in air forever.

& the girl's father reached  
for her mother's arm to keep her  
from plunging off the rooftop

of the hospital to fall into you,  
Brother. I know nothing  
but that impermanent rest.

How can you do it each time  
you take & take  
& wrap your permanence around

sleep? Brother,  
sometimes you terrify me.  
You make my heart

gallop like buffaloes  
in the white desert, large bodies  
advancing their fall.

## Interrogation of the Sodomite

In Mexico City, in 1901, police arrested 41 men at a party under charges of homosexuality. Many were subjected to slave labor. Since, the number 41 has been used in derogatory remarks against homosexuality.

There are currently six countries where the death penalty is used for people in same-sex relationships: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Yemen, Nigeria and Somalia.

~ Independent

1.  
Asked to remove my mask, I peeled off my face & let the world see
2.  
inside, a dark made of edges. Asked how I could look myself
3.  
in the mirror, I stood before a lake for days, my tongue dry
4.  
stone. I drank all the water. Fish swam inside me
5.  
for weeks. Tadpoles shot out my eyes in my sleep. Asked how I could dream
6.  
of men, their waltzing legs, the 41 sharp cheeks blushing in the candle
7.  
-lit dark, in Mexico, the 41 abdomens soaking a river with their shame
8.  
-less loving, I bit out my tongue, which shot in its silence to bruise and bloody
9.  
a loving
10.  
man's forehead

11.  
to death in Saudi Arabia today,

12.  
just for loving

13.  
the dark

14.  
edges in men.

## Dream Journal: Obituaries for the Unnamed

I forget my own grief writing obituaries  
for the unnamed. A mass grave in Ciudad Juárez  
takes fifty more bodies this morning, the gluttonous desert

opening daily its appetite. In a dream, I wander  
into a cave staked with corpses. I produce imprints  
of their faces in my mind. I want to

save them from the brutal coil  
of forgetting. How many of their names the tongues  
of loved ones cried? How long ago? I dig deeper into the cave,

my brain swollen with faces, & their blood  
pools up my ankles. Listen, the ones whose tongues  
have not been severed want to tell us

their stories: late one night a woman climbs a bus  
back home from the maquila & ends  
toothless & muzzled in a ditch. She mothered

a girl without a father, celebrated  
her twentieth birthday in her mother's house  
with cake & cold Coronas. A father leaves

his son and wife to cross the desert in the hollowed  
bottom of a truck. His gut sizzles in the sun  
-stunned metal, fighting other bodies for a breath.

Whatever air he wins is stale with piss.  
The truck halts &, quiet, he waits, & waits &—  
The dream ends. I shower. Rinse the salt

off my back. I drink black coffee. Eat cereal. I listen  
to the news. Again, a mass grave opens in Ciudad Juárez,  
& out there, a corpse flecks the desert's mouth.

## Self-Portrait of the Stolen Body

I've been taken  
bit by bit by being

made aware of my body's  
absences—

all its different holes.  
Men instilled in me

an empty.  
I've grown up

without a body  
of my own. Lost

first my belly, my  
8-year-old pouch

of resin to my best friend's  
uncle, his hardness

resting hot on my navel,  
his pulse there

a rhythm. I didn't know  
shame before. It arrived

merciful to fill the gap.  
Next went the pink

between my thighs,  
inflamed follicles

from after school running.  
I was eleven

when he claimed it.  
My body half

the length of his body

pressed over the unmade

bed, opened to expose  
my growing aches, my

early adolescence,  
& what I thought love

felt like: surrender:  
cavity: theft.

I believed another  
took my mouth

after, a boy my own age  
at the back of his

father's van,  
at the parking lot

of his temple. His  
mouth clumsy, open

against mine, carved  
a new space within me.

Often, I think  
about the blankness of it,

& how much of myself  
I gave willingly

that morning. I stretch  
my arms to early spring

light. The mattress  
belches beneath

my body, my body  
shifting to touch

my lover's lips, his wet  
edges: his mouth:

my mouth.

## Portrait of Child With Fruit & Rot

Know this: a woman awakens to a bed of cold sun, a new bruise  
in her right breast. Morning too green

& silent. She simmers inside her sheets.

▪

At school, a boy will ask you what your father does  
for a living. You'll say: *I don't have a dad*,  
won't understand when he laughs & says everybody has one.

▪

Last night: noble rot in his breath. Stirred drunkenness. But she is tired. Her back bends  
after standing all day cleaning rooms for strangers, plucking sour bedsheets, folding clean  
linens over singles & doubles, she folds

▪

herself in the dark  
to his touch,

says not tonight,  
don't, please not

▪

tonight. Her mother calls her  
a slut

on the phone. Before work,  
She listens, presses

an apple to the table.  
A crunch:

her red knuckles. She bites  
a brown stain

on the fruit.

▪

You'll learn to love the spoil, the apple's softest flesh, the bruise. But this woman won't want you

▪

sick. She'll pluck the fruit  
away from your bite, offer another

apple. Harder-fleshed. Bitter.

▪

Her mother calls— *He is not your husband. You cannot let him inside  
your house any time he wants.* He wants her

▪

to keep still, to press against the blue wallpaper without a fold in her body. He likes best the back of her head, that indentation where her spine begins. He separates her black hair, licks the speckle of perspiration on her neck's dark bend.

▪

Night— a cricket's metronome. A fly buzzing in the room. Brutal slurp of his hips. His breath rasps the air, loud with grit & again

she arches her back for support, her muscles  
pounded into fists, but the man who is not her husband, who will never be your father,

▪

unfolds her. He pushes her  
breast against the wall,

brings forth  
the involuntary leaking

of the milk  
you will drink

later in her life—

▪

This morning: An orange in the back of her fridge, bloated, so soft her fingers dip into the pulp as she lifts it from the cold and drops it into the trash bin.

## Glossary for What You Left Unsaid

### gaslight, *v.*

look:	how he changes:	first he's
an angel: his	arms extend	for you: he counts
plastered dents	to your neck—	his breath:
a crow's wing:	the savage	darling:
tall dark stranger	that came	into your life:
that forged the fissure	on your face—	he rushes
a fist	against you:	a bird plummets
cutting air:	a river of skin:	dark bruises

I'm afraid doctors will tell me the MRI shows:

my inside is coated with holes.

stones clog seven vital organs, including my heart.

an unidentified brown creature dwells the length of my intestine.

i'll be dead in nineteen weeks.

if not me, my father, whom i've never met.

if not my father, my mother, who has known me all my life.

most of all, i'm afraid they'll know:

three days ago a married man whose name he said was Fernando stapled me inside a rest  
stop stall in New Mexico for 196 seconds, kissed me dumbly, dry, & then strutted  
away.

that a part of him is still lodged in my spleen.

## Sinner

Forgive me, Brother: I sinned. I laughed  
at the joke with the gay priest and the altar boy, missing  
the punch-line: it's 2018. People still think gay = pedo.  
In my old bedroom I lit incense sticks after fucking Abner  
so you wouldn't know. I played straight most of my high school  
years. When I think of Abner, I think  
of that 90s Nickelodeon show which played in the background.  
My fist siphoned his blue  
boxer briefs until the cloth darkened. I tasted salt.  
In Sunday school, an older boy named Andy rocked  
his hips furiously, walking. Behind him, boys shadowed  
the sway, laughing. When he asked me if it was true  
that Abner and I were lovers, I knuckled his face, bent  
cartilage, smeared snot  
on my fingers. I liked his face  
collapsed under my second blow. I liked  
the other boys' cheering, behind us, their masculine claps  
convinced of the man I was, my red  
hands unfolded & ready  
to praise God.

## Dirge of the Removed Lung

Kingdom of his body has been ransacked & my body  
palps an absence as I climb him. Here his empty

breath. The word and the wound lodged  
down his throat. I kiss him,

try to pry out language with my tongue, his shortness  
of breath the only thing I learn

from his body. In this hospital  
he covers himself up

to his head in white sheets. He isn't used  
to sleep in daylight. If not for the *uzzzz* sound of his

lasting lung, sound of his life, sound  
of his sleep, I would've thought his body

a corpse, half a gasp not long enough  
to fill him. After his waking, the long tube blooms

out of his chest, draining the cavity. Comes the change  
of air, the coughing, & learning

to synchronize his breath as he walks  
back & forth from the sycamore outside

to this room. His kingdom opens & I run  
marathons inside him, in place of him, my fingers

tracing the jagged bridges of his ribcage, a vacant space  
beneath, that small pressure in his chest I fall into.

## 14th Birthday at Harlem

In your palm, the ripe weight  
of a pigeon, grey as the city, pulses  
with breath, a body longing release. You opened  
your eyes today to a new light, one filtered  
through thick buildings of glass: the cold sun

shedding onto asphalt. You kneel  
to the sidewalk. The feathered panic  
of the bird shifts between your fingers, the sharpness  
of its claws, & your hand  
tightens around it, unwilling

to let go. You took one cab, two buses, & a subway  
from New Jersey to New York, to Harlem, arrived  
after sundown, your skin a gallery  
of odors. You see your face in the black  
eye of the bird, think of last night's waiting

for the man who would've taken you  
around the city. You'd pictured  
his long figure, his smile  
vibrant in the tawny glow outside  
the Apollo, his large hand holding yours

as he invited you into his house  
where he would kiss your chest full of want  
to reach your unaltered heart swollen with salt.  
But your waiting gave way to the cold, a pounding  
in your legs, a pounding

through the numbness. After hours of standing  
in the brilliant dark, you slipped  
into an alley and balled yourself  
in the hollow space between two trashcans  
where you remained untouched, changed

only by the bitter concrete, by that internal puncture  
wound of the soul. When you woke up to find

the pigeon bundled next to you, you leapt up  
to seize it. The bird resigns to your grip the same way  
you give yourself to the alley. From an open window:

a soiled phonograph, a song  
you don't know. The falling wail  
of a saxophone lifts your arms and you let go  
of your jailbird, sending its round figure into that magnificent  
mantle of blue. Your palm throbs for the body

you held, for letting go of your thirteen  
little pasts. This is how it would feel to release  
the hand that might've held you  
in the night, the desire that escaped you.  
Now, step into that luminous street of day—

## 14th Birthday at Harlem

ripe  
as the  
body . open

glass:

& your sharp  
un

r e s t r a  
d in e  
the face  
last

taken  
picture

your

chest  
swollen

a pound

in an alley  
low

d

puncture

bundle

soiled

body

letting go

—

## Glossary for What You Left Unsaid

loss, *n.*

1. -

a fireplace heats your head the first house

you lived in stretches your memory your past

childhood & at night—

2. -

you believed a fat man

in a red suit brought you gifts

—despite you lied

to your mother seven times

that year despite you bit

your tongue until the taste—

to keep from spilling:

a.

how a man in your best  
friend's house asked you

to strip you climbed his shirtless  
torso in your white underwear

b.

spent time knowing: the brown  
fur: in his stomach: the nipple

standing hard to—

: your touch.

† loss, *v.*

1. -

how he unloads me:  
discharge on the belly—

small whimper & my body  
burning water

2. -

vessel: &

wreckage:

swollen wood:

3:

## Primer for a View of the Sea

### *1. Diagnosis: Mesa, AZ, 2002*

My brother never saw the sea, except in the grit  
of a black & white TV in our hotel room, in the late

hours of his days. Glow  
battered his lip, that pink

membrane roofed with craters, pale emblem  
of sores he kept teething

in restless dreams. I don't want to see him there  
after I wake alone in a room clogged

with memory: his palm jutting out of the pungent  
dark. How he saw shadows

dissected by the orange nightlight  
in our bedroom. Ghosts

I'd formed with my hands. Our parents swayed in their bed  
beside us, silhouetted like seamounts. I don't want to see

his head bright with burning,  
streaks of hair plastered

to his forehead, my hand against his  
curvature, measuring

the hot sickness inside. I don't want  
his jaw jittering against my fingers

nor his voice thinned by the swelling. I just want his quiet  
awe: that wide

take of an empty beach, the gray ocean  
enduring the screen, that ending

of a movie neither of us recognized, & how the body  
of water silvered

the room, turned brilliant speckle in that foreign city, a beach  
outlining seamounts in artificial light.

2. *Puncture: San Diego, CA, 1996*

Last time you visited the ocean, pain  
turned your foot a foreign limb. The circle

of a stingray wavered in the sand, stone

gray comet flashing to the waves,  
& your mother's face a watercolor,

your thin gauze of tears. *Lay*

*sprawled, look, the violet edge of morning  
dissolves into blue, so immense you lose*

*yourself in it.* Years later,

learn, from a documentary you see  
with your brother, a stingray slips

onto the land to give birth. Think

of the sky, the passing moon, a fish  
glowing in black water, & your brother

swimming four months inside

your mother's belly that day, the day  
your tiny scar stuck like coral

to the bottom of your body.

3. *Dream Journal: Ciudad Juarez, MX, 2004*

To dream I lie in the room that used to be our room,  
in the house in which I lost you, that red bungalow  
covered in Boston ivy, four weeks before I returned  
to the sea. This room of wood floors and bright white  
walls dislocates each night to give way to my dreaming.  
Tonight the room becomes a city. Miles of salt crack  
under my feet. Skyline of empty shadow, red backdrop.  
I look for you here. The city a black socket on the world's  
face. Superficial bright wound. I call your name  
& the city throws my voice back across the salt.  
In the horizon, a wave rushes toward me, falling  
mountain of water ready to devour all. Your voice  
inside it. Signal lost at sea. Transmission faint  
as the song from the broken radio. You say:

*Brother*

*I'm here.* And the wave  
grows so near I can taste  
bitterness of water in my lungs. Before  
the wall of liquid memory hits, this city  
becomes a room again, four bare walls and two  
beds, one of them empty. I rise  
to the sound of water trickling  
against glass. Has the wave with your return  
swallowed this house whole? The window  
blurred with rain. The ceiling  
dripping wet. Here I listen  
to the raindrops, these footsteps  
sticking to the rooftop of our house.

*4. Shore Sight: Matamoros, MX, 2015*

Some days our dead fly down  
to visit the ocean. They become so small

in their passing we mistake them  
for the evening breeze licking our necks

when the shore darkens, empties,  
and we are left there. Each

a single shadow merging into air.

5. *Sea Sight: Matamoros, MX, 2003*

We drive my brother to the Gulf of Mexico, his body  
sand inside a gray basin. I carry him  
& the road slams a pebble against the window  
to interrupt our silence. I fall asleep, dream  
we arrive to find sea and sky traded places. I wake  
in stillness, already in Matamoros, my mother asleep  
behind the steering wheel & the shade  
of oncoming evening softening her face. Here is my brother, still  
in my hand. In the hard sand  
of the shore, I give him back  
to my mother. Great Gulf,  
here comes my brother, salt of the earth ready  
to fall into you. My brother:  
a body made dust that crawled into my bed in thunder-  
laden nights: a body now scattered. On our way back,  
silence: a cave collapsed onto me, again, & outside,  
the river trails this black road home, the arms  
of the ocean in which my brother sleeps.

4:

## Glossary for What You Left Unsaid

**city, n.** densely inhabited arc: in my life: architecture that failed me— where: you became archeologist of my indefinite terrain: & sirens of police cars dashed the roads to our houses— where: you took a hiding place to keep us safe from the bullets: & it rained 4 consecutive days: flooding the basement— where: amber burns the streets all night &, always, music skids past a window or an open door— at dusk: 3 corpses littered 3 avenues— where: each thunder rupturing the sky was a gunshot fired: in my mother's tympanum: each unanswered phone call— my disappearance— one night the entire colonia flared with police lights: I was inside you: on the couch: in the living room: I felt your legs elongate: beneath me: & your face flashed: blue: red: blue— **border, n.** scaf/fold supporting our bodies: collapsed: union: bridge: you walked me halfway back: the last night I saw you: & our breaths fogged the air: fermented in whiskey— you leaned in to piss down the chain-link— where: two countries verge: & you bit my lip hard enough to draw: blood— we fumbled: finally: divided— our bodies made singular: again: **city, n.** brand new & darkly paved arc: pillar of sun— where: thunder outside the windowpane is only thunder: & past 9 the streets remain quiet & dark— I excavate another's mouth: at the back of a car: at the tall of a mountain— we blister: lights of two cities engraving our faces: it's been six years: but I turn a fleeting look to that corner: from my fleeting lover's mouth: past the darkened neighborhoods: past the metallic strip of border— where: your house would be: what distance refracts there— what music smuggles out the window from your room—

## Dream Journal: Prayer Book

1.

I used to be afraid of Jesus, that holy man  
in his exact posture,  
his cranium tilted, indefinitely  
holey, vine-slashed, a grimace  
agape in a plea, perhaps asking why

his father abandoned him  
in the portrait my mother made me  
kneel to & pray. I was 4. In a dream,  
riding my grandfather's van, I saw  
out the window the same bloodied face  
on a rundown billboard surrounded  
by impossibly green lawn.

I crouched behind the driver's  
seat, Jesus' gaze carving my back  
until my mother assured me: *he's gone*.

I came out  
from my hiding place dribbling

sweat, & in the distance saw  
the painted face outside the crystal  
approach again, his eyes  
following the vehicle's black shell, where I  
crouched & came out,  
& crouched & came out, &—  
each time the loop

replayed my winding & soaked  
resurfacing. I came  
out from the dream to a cot  
of urine, to the face  
of Jesus in the oiled canvas, nailed

to the wall, gawking  
at my shame. My mother scrubbed  
my thighs red, bent her knees  
to watch me recite her great  
grandmother's prayer book,

& when the shadow of a bird  
at the window, or a moth

drumming against the light  
bulb broke my steady outpour  
of words, my mother muttered  
into my ear: *Jesus is always looking  
after you.*

2.

In the Baptist temple, the cross  
hangs behind the podium,  
bodiless. My polluted river  
of thought drowns  
the pastor's sermon— this wood

lacking flesh, & the exposed abs  
of Jesus at my family's church  
bleeding & fastened  
to that symbol of faith. I confess:  
I carry desire in my bones.  
A friend crosses and uncrosses  
his legs beside me, bangs

the tip of his shoe against  
my sole, and I  
turn to face him, first catch  
the brown scar stitching  
a cross above his eyebrow. I'm here

because he knows  
I like the tough fruit in a man's throat,  
& he wants,  
like all good Christians want,  
to change this. I'm here  
because ten years ago, in his mother's lake  
house, we shared the top mattress

of a bunk bed, pasting  
glow-in-the-dark planets  
on the wooden ceiling. Late  
morning I pretended to sleep.  
He runs his fingers up my thigh,

fills me with blood—  
Ran. Filled—I'm here because I want  
a change of tense.  
He chews gum. His mandible  
speckles the room, a scent  
of cinnamon, myrrh,  
the deepest sweat.

## The Hierophant

Do I dare call this desert home? The bulging sun  
over the black strip of highway, great and savage  
as God, has killed another man

who lost his house six months after losing  
his job and spent the day looking for change in the hands  
of strangers. He thought he only felt tired, that he'd fall

asleep, covered by the fat blanket of summer,  
and wake up a few hours later to return  
to the city. I was raised there. My past lays

inside three houses and two temples  
I no longer own: the red bricked building covered  
in violet Bougainvillea, a large house, full of people, where

I once dared my neighbor's son to stare into the sun,  
and for two weeks he only saw the reddish glow  
of evening the way eyes catch light

through closed lids. We call this the Sun City. Here  
I learned that God is the same  
as the beggar sprawled over the desert

a mile away from the roads, overlooked by the passing  
traffic, until years later a woman spots the shine  
of its bones picked clean by time and heat.

## Watching a Cartel Snuff Film With My Brother

This morning, another cadaver, or rather the parts a white van dispersed on the 25 meters of gray road in Las Torres. Juárez, again,

you burn bridges with safeness.

To meet the man who would be my man, I take the first bus to his house. The driver halts to the red & blue-strobed tarmac. City with leaden veins, I've lived the first 25 years of my life inside you, a witness to your violence. I learned love & loss each day.

At 14 I rode another bus with my brother  
to see a man die, after school, the two of  
us seated on broken tapestry. We  
unboarded

to unpaved streets, to a classmate's house,  
where we saw

a saw serrating the man's jugular/ the head/ a  
wobble/ nearly separated/ red/ pouring from the neck. I  
saw my brother's face flushed, his eyes frozen at the  
computer screen.

What did we expect

to gain from replaying a man's end? Again,

from the bus's window:

meat on the road, red muscle of an arm, a torso blackened in fire.

## Glossary for What You Left Unsaid

Many victims of human trafficking are used to ferry drugs across international borders.

~ UNODC

### **concave, *n.***

**a.** a hollow, a cavity: a hiding place: inside the shell of a car: inside the tire: or the seats' gray tapestry: in the lining of a jacket: in the acidic purse of a stomach: the white powder wadding sixty rubber condoms: downed with milk: or pushed into the red velvet lining of an anus: inside raw flesh: pocketed breasts & buttocks: hollowed out & refilled:

**†b.** I cross & re-cross borders: full: & empty myself on cold metal beds: or cold porcelain: each time the long cylinder of a gun's gullet sings: echoes of hot bullets:

**c.** because these things are put inside my body: I am distinctly female: in your mind— a bottom drawer in your house hides a gun: for safety: the glass pipe: the pocket mirror: & what I once crumpled down my esophagus: make a line: piston the lightness of smoke: make another line: I am sorry: my sister heard a rupture in her stomach: the rubber's softest whisper: undoing: the rest: of her life.

## Los Olvidados

El CRAEMAC is an asylum for the mentally ill at the far edge of Ciudad Juárez. According to staff, the families of many of their patients leave, never to return.

At the desert's edge, a man dangling  
large hoop earrings shakes my hand, presents himself

as Juan Gabriel, assures the singer

in the TV, in the Mariachi outfit, stole  
his identity, concealed him

inside this desert

where the stench of urine fumes off the corners of the asylum. He sings  
in a high, uneven pitch: *soy honesta con él*

*¿contigo / a él lo quiero ¿a ti te he olvidado—*

▪

Summer exhausts  
salt from our pores, riddles us

with somniac lull. At the peak  
of the season's heat, the violent are segregated

in rooms, stunned with hypodermics. We scavenge  
our arms for sores. The desert air

limits our intake: our  
exhalation of smoke.

▪

& again  
there is rice  
for dinner  
& supper.

▪

& another

winter outlines

the cracks where

our bones snapped

two decades ago.

▪

Daily, for three years, a woman has clutched  
the edge of the iron barrier separating the city. She

waits for her daughters. Children sprint across  
the sidewalk outside, rattle the iron & her fingers.

Her eyes widen, & her lungs swell for the longest  
minute: a gush of wind, the desert rippling inside her.

## Sleep, Brother,

has strange ways of arriving unannounced  
since you died. Has been dreamless white

—a series of blanks on a page otherwise  
filled with text. Unnecessary

white space      you left  
in our lives. Brother, I see you

when I wake up. Ghost  
of dreams I didn't have. Or have

forgotten by the time the single fleck of sun  
punctures the seaming of black sky and blacker

mountain top. Violet stain  
on the ceiling of the city. In the balcony,

I remember my night's waiting  
for sleep to carry you out

of the bedroom,  
my first lover, outside, ready

to slip in-  
to me. Firm

smell of his breath held  
over my nostrils.

Screech of the bed & your breath  
steaming from the other side

of the room. What dreams  
we interrupted with my lover's ending,

that liquid hum? What dreams  
when I turned to see you seeing

our limbs under the blankets? What questions

you never asked. Your silence

the blank space I yearned,  
now the white

slit of air inside my ribs—

### **Blue Insomnia**

Stubborn scrape of vine against glass, my window's bone  
shutter, & the hymn Grandfather's grandfather

clock intones. Sounds all night— water running—

a bluebird warbles somewhere in the trees, & in my mouth—  
the taste of pennies.

Cadavers outside my window tap their fingers on the cold glass.

Their figures blur in rain.

& with them, Grandfather's face trickles from the past.

Three black hours I keep tonguing my teeth for copper. The  
shape of a coin pushes against my vertebrae, under the mattress.

I lift it. Find: air, dry flowers, a black beetle crawling, a spring  
popping fabric, a rusted razor I used to cut myself in high  
school.

My grandfather slipped quarters between his molars & bit down, wanted the evenings for himself, so he locked the bedroom door

upon which I knocked & knocked until my mother found me half asleep on the floor with reddened knuckles.

When he lived in a house near a river, Grandfather told me one day we'd build a boat from the old sycamore & sail to the Gulf of Mexico.

I could sleep then.

& in my sleep I traveled the country's veins, waived past friends & friends of friends, collected coins in my back pocket, growing heavy with gold.

That night I woke up sinking.

Some nights I want a mouth to kiss, want to fill myself  
with as much of the world. Like my grandfather, I want  
to be torn open with as much  
of the world. Last night I took a quarter from the gutter  
and took it to my mouth. Because I want & want.  
Because the sky lacks moon, the rain  
lacks voice, & hunger  
hangs a Hyacinth in the mouth of my stomach.

## Dream Journal: Long Letter for Lost Loves

Last night I lost you again in a dream. You, who loved me in my pink braided Mohawk & purple eye shadow, & you who loved the curvature of my calligraphy. You were both there when the dream formed in the grey dark behind my eyelids, from the hard pillow holding

the back of my head, at a classroom in the Community College, a writing night class neither of you attended. You looked the age you were when I first met you: both nineteen, a boy with stubborn stubble & eyes swollen for lack of sleep, a girl with a crew cut & forearms

tattooed with the astrological signs of past lovers. I'm one of two Pisces inked just above your wrist, the bodies of four small fish forming the figure eight. We sat in the darkened classroom. A television played images of ancient ruins before us. We blinked & appeared

there: my feet slipping wet stones in the abandoned night club, in Juárez, where I'd slunk into a woman for the first & last time (you). Where rain crossed our bodies, falling from the corroded ceiling & we'd sprawl unclothed in a discarded mattress reading graffiti in silence

after our sex. Where months after I'd took my third man (you) to practice paintball shots against the multi-colored scriptures in the walls. I'd tried to kiss past the dentures of your jeans before you stopped me hand to collarbone to tell me your father had died

two weeks prior. I'd cradled you, your ribs heaving against my bones, & in that exact instant you'd entered fully the vacant edges in my body. Both of you walked the dream beside me. We followed a song I cannot name back to another corner of my life, where

your feet dug into the soil, your extremities coiled into branches, sprouted their leaves, & wild birds jettisoned the black crevices in your bark. I saw & followed myself between the spaces of two willows in a park, to a phone booth, where I locked myself and waited

for the ringing bell,  
the cold handset on my ear,  
the sound of your voice.

## After—

I hated, after my brother died, that we'd spend so much time in the dark, my mother sitting there, a black figure in the blue darkness, & that I couldn't sleep for days. I sat with her, scratching

the leather of the couch, expecting her to scold me not to get lost in my brother's memory. The living room stillness brought back the halls in the hospital I walked by my brother's side, his hand

slim on my shoulder, so light it might've well been air beneath his robes, which fell from his neck like a bell, his body resuming where his ankles appeared, thin flaps gliding over

the white floor. I hated that after he'd gone my mother still served three dishes each morning, oatmeal gone stale by evening, sticky like my brother's throat, the bucket of grime under his bed

that kept his sickness hidden, that now my mother's face reflects his, deep circles around her eyes, her skin outlining bones, her arms the branches of trees. When sunlight

smuggles the window, creasing the lineament in her face, her hair wrapped in a turban, I see my brother, softly taking into his lungs the hot summer air. Silently, I watch him breathe.

## Notes

In the third section of “Puñal”, the details on Erykah Tijerina’s murder come from *El Paso Times*.

The “Glossary for What You Left Unsaid” poems are inspired by the definitions of their respective words from the Oxford English Dictionary.

“Dirge of the Removed Lung” is titled after a line in Saeed Jones’ poem “Beheaded Kingdom”.

“14<sup>th</sup> Birthday at Harlem” begins with a line from Li-Young Lee’s “Persimmons”.

“at Har m” is an erasure of “14<sup>th</sup> Birthday at Harlem”.

“Glossary for What You Left Unsaid” (pp. 49) is for Luis Alonso.

The epigraph for “Glossary for What You Left Unsaid” (pp. 55) comes from an article in the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime website, titled “Drug mules: Swallowed by the illicit drug trade”. The last section is based on the testimony recounted in the article by DJ, a former drug mule.

“After—” begins and ends with lines by Sharon Olds.

## Vita

Aldo Amparán lives in the border cities of El Paso, TX, US, and Ciudad Juárez, CHIH, Mexico. He holds a BA in English and American Literature from the University of Texas at El Paso. His work has appeared in *Chrysalis*, and *Rio Grande Review*.

Permanent address: 5324 Garry Owen Rd.  
El Paso, TX 79903

This thesis was typed by Aldo Iván Amparán