

As Luck Would Have It

*By the Same Author*

POETRY

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*Fieldnotes* (San Diego: Junction Press, 1995)  
*A Block-print by Kuniyoshi* (Ashuelot NH: Four Zoas/Nighthouse Press, 1994)  
*Intimate Wilderness* (New York: New Rivers Press, 1976)  
*Letter to Maxine* (Deerfield, MA: The Heron Press, 1974)

AS TRANSLATOR

- Virgilio Piñera, *La isla en peso / The Whole Island* (Shearsman ebook, 2010)  
  
Gaspar Orozco, *Notas del país de Z / Notes from the Land of Z*  
(Chihuahua, Mexico: Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua, 2008)  
  
José Kozler, *Stet: Selected Poems* (New York: Junction Press, 2006)  
  
Javier Manríquez, *Cuaderno de San Antonio / The San Antonio Notebook*  
(La Paz, Mexico: Editorial Praxis, 2004)

AS EDITOR

- The Whole Island: Six Decades of Cuban Poetry*  
(University of California Press, 2009)  
  
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*for Pearl*





I

# California Girls



## Husbandry

Attention sways, can't fix  
to anything.

Every morning he goes to his garden  
barefoot, for the cold pleasure. Each day the beans  
are taller; the wind  
has flattened them against the wire  
long enough for a tendril  
to take hold  
that the vine may climb  
toward sunlight. All of it  
as if by accident—as if untended: this row of lettuce,  
this of beets,  
a vagrant clump of weeds, a pile of cuttings. After all,  
it's the ratty ends of things  
he finds attractive. Little room  
to cultivate a life  
or a wife.

To accept one's lot may be  
to become a pillar of sorrow,  
he thinks, but to be alone  
is salt itself.

## Harvest

In my last New England autumn I played the odds  
the night first frost was called for and left  
the rest of the tomatoes  
unharvested. They survived  
somehow, bright summery red  
against the firs and grass  
in the waning light of my garden clearing,  
swamp-maples in the streambed  
maples beside it  
and the vivid undergrowth in the pine-duff  
flaming their various golds and purples.  
When I finally plucked them  
at the last moment before hard frost, they made a sauce  
to last the winter. Now,  
in this season of death, my first such,  
my father dead, and Bill, and Richard,  
I make the yearly sauce across the continent, where nothing  
as dangerous as autumn  
seems to happen. I think to make  
an emblem of that last  
harvest before winter,  
as if my father and Richard  
had not strangled on their own fluids  
and lovely, curious and fastidious Bill,  
whose presence itself could heal the wounds of childhood,  
had not turned hideous in the act of dying.

# Feral Garden

Stepped on a dead bird had been stepped on unnoticed  
many times, but this time  
in socks,  
whatever clear fluid wicked up, through  
to my skin, cold and greasy. Not much—  
a nestling. Pink, naked, beak and feet,  
blue eyelid.  
Scraped it up from in front of the door  
with a piece of paper, its mark  
still on the deck,  
and into the garbage. But noticed  
a pale red stain that had been hidden  
beneath its body that must have been  
its whole life's-blood.

Hours later  
I dreamed I had poked out my left eye  
on the sharp edge of the shower curtain  
and on the floor  
a bloodied globe with a blue pupil for all the world  
intact, but useless. And spent my sleep  
testing my vision back and forth  
blinking each eye coming to terms  
with my new affliction.

Fell from the nest  
found by the possum or the neighbor's cat  
and left here? From the other side of  
the garden, where my wife has hung  
a feeder full of seeds from a bough,  
making that space the main hangout  
for the neighborhood flyers, doves to sparrows,  
and a better prowler  
along the fence behind it  
for whatever felines. Who

are we feeding  
in this wild garden, the small birds  
eating their seeds at the feeder  
and diving to the tilled ground for insects.  
Between us the scattered petunias and peppers.

So let me tell you about my garden.

## As Luck Would Have It

Strange, Carlos says, to see the country  
beyond the city, a line of hills  
in the distance. I'm here,  
I could be there, I told myself once  
at the open window, two realms  
of the possible.

Earlier today at gray noon  
a parade of Sikhs followed the van  
in which their living saint was carried  
through the streets of Glasgow. They wore orange  
turbans or shawls and walked  
barefoot, the difference between here and Lahore  
soon apparent, a choice made  
and remade daily.

Sickening at the thought.  
Nausea, dread.  
Not so much moving towards  
as averse to,  
as good a way to choose  
as any.

That a great wound's behind it may be useful to think  
whether true or not.

Maybe there was a voyage to a place that the mind seeks  
forever after, that's become—what—heart's-desire, but changed,  
so that the voyage can be made now only in dreams, as if  
abducted nightly by the wee folk  
one had once been one of. I just  
didn't want to do it, I did this  
instead. What  
after the mountains? now just beyond suburbs, the refuge  
in hot weather, that banal, where mishap

had enchanted each place water collected, the slow spring  
in the field beneath a lone bush  
that was never cut, the shed  
where the blacksmith worked  
chained to his forge,  
the bear in its cage,  
the mythic sundaes and the catfish  
big as your arm, how in a flash  
it could all be turned around, a horse  
poisoned by clover, a line of houses  
become uncanny, somewhere in there  
a sort of decision, “I would rather not” or  
“I would rather,” creating a field  
from which the figure  
would emerge. What emerges.  
But how did I get here,  
and how did this field happen?



## Translated

In exile do you hear  
horrible stories from the homeland and  
wring your hands? do you  
turn your back and begin to make as they say  
a new life?

.

As if body-language had accents,  
which it does, the stranger easy to spot  
across the field.

But here, watching the Irish barmaid wait for the drink, her arm  
folded so that forearm rests against sternum, wrist  
curled, her fingers  
toying with a necklace.  
One would have thought it painful, but the stance  
has years of practice behind it,  
the line from gesture to dance,  
depiction to enunciation.

She spoke the gestures  
of her native land.

And that other one did so after three generations.

.

I suddenly find myself imagining  
my friends torn, dis-  
membered, nightmares  
from the evening news,

and imagine last words,  
Carlos taking them down  
because I'm beyond writing. "I have always been

a harlequin," I say,  
too distracted to find the right phrase.

What kind of legacy would that be,  
lucky as I've been,  
all the sounds of the world to choose from.

.

Always puzzled by the separation of passion from the everyday.  
Impossible to imagine the way instinct could erupt  
through such lives, clothing itself  
a form of refusal.

.

Even now your lips remember  
when they were blossoms.  
And I remember when I would say  
"Your lips are blossoms."

.

Civilization and its discontents.  
It's a matter of degree isn't it.  
Complicity's the point isn't it.

.

Two kids on a dark porch  
court and smoke and cough  
across the street, expecting the night  
and its breezes to disperse  
whatever evidence.

.

Places named for the words first heard there. So  
what I call "pomegranate" you call  
"ruddy," or "went," and courtship  
becomes the exchange of names.  
Smitten, how charming that what you call

“haberdasher” I call  
“clout,” though we both  
swim there. Translating desire,  
I reach for “cudgel,” that mound  
you love me to touch, the left one, and its mate,  
“compassion.”

.

Every word a sort of conquest.

## California Girls

This time that gracelessness one would mistake for candor  
is merely gracelessness,  
and wouldn't it be lovely  
to dance  
through a lifetime. Gravity  
is such a cruel instructor.  
What can I say? In the failed  
garden I've made this summer  
a few blossoms nod on the peas  
for all the world like orchids.  
One takes one's consolations  
where one finds them. Time to admire  
the tenacity of weeds.