ESTOY TRISTEZA

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ESTOY TRISTEZA

Prom

"No tuve mentor mejor que la calle - un padre que sin fuga en su regazo, sin culpa de su propio destino- y a quien debo su cariñoso recuerdo por los momentos de felicidad que pudo dar a mi vida."

Ricardo Izquierdo Davila (Pirulo), 2011

Para mi padre Pirulo

y hermano mayor Ricardito

que en paz descansen

I HAVE TWO SHADOWS

One is darker And at night with lights off I can only whisper softly into my sister's ear

Did you see the fathers

at the birthday party?
They lost the game
and as punishment in their beer-stained button-up shirts and jeans
gyrated their bodies slowly to the clown's song
Asi asi como mueve la colita, si no la mueve la tiene tapadita

DRIVING THROUGH MOUNTAINS

We were listening to Michael Jackson while driving through mountains filled with mansions and in the mansions were children setting the dinner table. During dinner the fathers were silent and watched as the children devoured the last pea. Right before bedtime and while tucking the children in, the fathers told the children a joke. It went something like this: There was once a penguin that always asked his mother the same question and one day he asked the question again. He said, Mother, are you sure I am a penguin? and his mother replied, Why of course you are a penguin, silly. And in surprise the penguin whispered, Then why is it mother that I am so cold?

MIAMI SWAN SONG For Randy

Last night my baby brother told me bedtime stories. *Once upon a time, there was a boy that wasn't friends with his hand... that's it,* he said, *if you don't stop crying you won't dream.*

Three more hours on this flight as I watched Florida vanish past the sea and into clouds.

Each cloud has a family and each family is moving in the most painful slow sprint, all in a great migration.

I could stay here forever on a plane that will never land.

We could just drift hundreds of miles above this city, surrounded by the same people for eternity. The three Red Sox fans and the flatulent man behind me could become intimate friends. Maybe in time we could explore the farthest reaches of the wingspan, the secret crevices of the cockpit. We could pamper ourselves with cocktail parties dressed in each other's clothes.

I could fall in love with the flight attendant. Her hair barely caresses her ears as she whispers the list of purchasable snacks into mine.

You should see the ocean from here. Complete stillness all around. The water turns steadily into sky, there is no separation.

SELF PORTRAIT @ 20

There is a black bird confronting the new layers of snow on the building outside my window.

We watch him, laughing solemnly as he makes a line of miniscule tracks.

Days later, I am standing at the bus stop with my hands deep in the dirty snow. I think, there is no way around it, as people gather at my sides

waiting for their destinations.

I let my hands wade in the mucky slush
until they too become ice cubes. The driver lets me on for free.

On the bus I imagine a variety of accidents a great pile-up or someone slipping on a wet floor. My hands are melting. It is my birthday.

The thing about ice is you must be conscious of every movement, each motion taken into account. I am not much older now, but snow has the quality of chuño and I can pretend I know a little bit about that.

FLAGLER

Back when CVS was Eckerd and the Presidente Supermarket was a Food Star and this picture frame hung on the wall of our first Miami apartment everything was on and off of West Flagler Street: the stop for the 11 bus that took us to Downtown to the sunglasses store and later to the perfume store where mami used to work, both Kinloch Park Elementary and Middle, the Ocean Bank Movie theatre where I saw Finding Nemo and got stuck in the elevator, the public library where we made those butterfly refrigerator magnets that mom still has, the coin laundry where Andrea and I went on Saturdays where we got our first puppy Chocolate and watched the husbands play on the slot machines, the church we got kicked out of because we were wearing shorts, the Blockbuster that was next to the Laundromat where we rented our VHSs, the \$3.99 Shoe Store that dad used to pass out flyers for and where Uncle Max got me some sneakers for my first Miami birthday, the Kmart that was a far walk away, the Burger King we would sometimes go to after school, the apartment building Genesis lived at where I tore my knee open on her bike, the intersection where dad had the accident, the stop where we met Tia Evelyn, the liquor store, immigration office, the fortune teller and the classroom where mami met Lu, the efficiency where dad lived for a while, the Spanish restaurant that dad filled with foam from the mop and detergent, the church where I did my first communion, the corner where Manny and Nelly's school bus used to pick us up, the dollar store where I got Lu a hammer for Christmas and all the decorations in our apartment, the bakery where Lu used to get us pastelitos at, the living room where I talked to Alina on the phone for hours after watching Clifford, Dragon Tales and Sagwa the Chinese Siamese Cat, the store where I got my first CD with all the 2001 hits, the road where Lu taught mami how to drive again, the sunshowers that soaked us on our way home, where we used to get our calling cards, the pharmacy where we got this disposable camera, the place where I took this picture.

SUPERMARKET BREAKFAST

Escucha,

hay tantos temas de los que he querido hablar contigo durante todos estos años.

My father and I stand together at the pharmacy which is inside the bakery of the supermarket. The pharmacist is on the telephone with a customer that wants fifty rolls of bread.

He goes down the list of every little thing he ever thought he'd like to discuss with me in the past three years. We're having breakfast in a supermarket. Milk from a box and bread in a paper bag. He is speeding through the list, repeating words and looking to my eyes for answers. The bright lights of the pastry stand are flashing.

I reach for the list, so carefully considered, so intricately numbered, say

Please,

I want to talk about right now, this moment with the people walking solemnly with their shopping baskets filled with marmalade and crackers. Later, we can remember together how when I was very young and Fujimori was in power, you turned our house into a dance studio. Our home was filled with rooms of people dancing. Outside, children stepped over their own toes learning Festejo and Marinera, the living room burst with grandpas and grandmas dancing sweetly to a Bolero. And in your bedroom we moved all the furniture out for the fathers and mothers that shook to a Cumbia.

ESTOY TRISTEZA

I

My uncle tells me that every country has a spirit. He says that I've lost the spirit of our country that it is no longer in my features, my way of speaking, of breathing.

In Tinco we meet Teofila Silvestre.

I am standing outside her adobe home from where I can see the tallest snowy mountain lit faintly by every single constellation. And what has brought you here Teofila, to this land of violent frost?

I cannot sleep at night.

She says in broken Spanish, *estoy tristeza*. Her cat has died and a huayhuash has sucked the blood of her pregnant guinea pig dry.

We are driving to the place where my mother was born. My uncle has waited twenty-five years to return. Twenty-five years since the only time it ever snowed in the town of Samangay and he walked incredulous for miles; every hill was draped in white.

It was the first time he saw snow.

We are 2,224 meters above sea level, yet just yesterday in Ancash I could smell the ocean from my window. My uncle says that the roads are like the veins of the country, amid which hundreds of people ceaselessly circulate and bring life.

We drive through the town in which mercury from the nearby mine overflowed the streets like a river and made its way into the town's water.

Now there is thirst.

These hills are not just hills.

These mountains are filled with gold.

It was what drove white settlers here, deep in these mountain valleys.

II.

Every morning a band awakens the city, playing huaynos through the narrow streets. It is San Juan Bautista's festival, which means puro baile. I am in a large crowd, arm in arm with three girls I have just met and the entire town is here, dancing.

Somewhere inside of this brightly colored, snuggled multitude are all of my aunts flowing wildly to the Chichas and Huaynos. Closer to the stage I can spot Misho, the man with the green eyes, the one that glued the soles of my shoes back together.

I am dancing with a fifteen-year-old boy, yet these palms are not his. These sandpaper hands don't belong to him. I ask for his name as I try to brush off the roughness of his hands, he tells me he tills the fields, picks potatoes, grinds corn.

When no one is looking, I run to the highest slope of the tallest hill. I rub my face into the fertile soil of this mountain plateau, searching for the spirit, wanting nothing more but to have it again in my features, my way of speaking, of breathing.

Down the road a motorcycle taxi driver asks me if I would dance with him tonight. At that moment, the firework castle in the Plaza goes off, abolishing every other sound and sight.

It is a beautiful thing to run away from.

CHOTA

The whole town is at the cozo when San Juan comes around. It's late June, the cheap seats overflowing with people. Ready for the estocada and the lulling of the bull.

Last time I stayed home, making up a story that I had gotten myself tickets at the other side of the ring. I go for a walk in the plaza, everything is closed except the salon. I get my nails done, a hot pink, the tech asking me where I came from. I tell her my mother is from Chota.

Even from the bedroom I could hear the cozo commotion blocks away. But on that day this torrential rain erupted and everyone at the bullfight pulled blue tarps over their heads and ran home, disappointed. From the window, a sea of blue moving swiftly to take cover. A crowd of motorcyclists immune to the rain. No fight today.

In the morning all the kids including Marquito have their torero outfits on running around the street taking turns being bull, bullfighter. Olé! Olé! Olé! Palmas palmas palmas.

The undeniable precision of the wooden sword on the bullboys. Later Marquito shows me all the little cuyes squirming around in the box. We are having lunch everyday that we are here, at Tia Eva's house.

The family has come down from Chiclayo and Lima for the festival. That night Bryan and I go to see Aunt Gela, but end up getting drunk with her husband, Tio Roco. He brought out all these karaoke DVDs and started singing his favorite Cumbias and Valses, while I noticed all the portraits and newspaper cutouts from back in his bullfighter days around the room. His golden traje de luces, while he sings, Ay cómo has hecho para que te quiera? dependo de ti como planta a la tierra, sin mover un dedo me has hecho adorarte, a primera vista me enamoraste.

DON'T MAKE THE SAME MISTAKES AS I

Our feet should each have one bone, no? Like a boot, my grandmother says as we are sitting patiently at the Traumatology waiting room. Like a doll.

In my grandmother's hometown the people talk about a hill that is made of gold. It sits above everyone's homes in a place that they call El Calvario.

She makes a sport out of spotting every person with a casted limb, as if finding a secret species that she now belongs to. *I see you've a broken arm*, she says to the woman beside her just like comparing Pokemon cards. *I have broken my foot*.

On the way home, we smell the oil refinery then the gum factory. The cab driver tailgates a sea of motorcycle taxis. Somewhere, out in that sea is the man that almost struck my grandmother, spinning her foot all the way around her ankle. He nods his head softly to the radio, feeling sweet brittle wind on his ears.

Paula says some time ago a group of people came into town looking for the hill and have been scooping it out little by little ever since. The waters that ran down the mountain slope become poisoned by their mining residues. Many died.

I am awakened by a small tremor.

Plagued by her lover's abandonment and her mother's death, the girl next door plays the same song everyday on repeat. The house is a boombox, its wooden walls magnify the melody and my bed trembles to the words *Nadie te amará como te amo*.

As I rise, I can hear my grandmother watching the news in black and white on her small color TV.

Later, it begins to drizzle as I am walking with my Uncle Mario in Lima. There is music spilling out of every bus avoiding every traffic regulation. There's a parade and a woman selling corn and another selling bubbles. Through the bubbly mist I see three men, each holding hundreds of balloons in their hands and floating, centimeters above the moist ground.

SELF PORTRAIT @ 21

I am really good at missing the bus.

I am often about to turn a corner where the bus stops and I can feel it, something in my chest, like un presentimiento like my father seeing a vision of his father knocking on the door of his house and turning the corner and locking eyes with him, with his hands at the door.

The bus speeds down the road, while I concentrate on the sound of my boots on the snow. Like squeezing chuño in your hands.

At the stop I watch specks of white bouncing off the black umbrellas of three Dominicanas.

When I think of umbrellas, I remember pushing a shopping cart in the Miami sun showers con mami and my sister with \$50 worth of groceries for the month.

Sometimes the only safe place is between your tacky flowery bed sheets (como las de tu abuelita) with your lover.

For my 21st birthday mami gives me a bracelet with my name engraved in a little silver heart. It reminds me of the golden hoop earrings my best white friend got herself with her name splitting the circle, Tracey.

And I wonder what it means to have your name incised into something. When I'm walking with my eyes on the floor beneath me I can't tell if I am seeing the snow or its shadow.

On the first night of my birthday, I write my name onto the windshield of a parked car with my finger.

TWO NEIGHBORS MEET FOR THE FIRST TIME

I was filling the tips of my boots with toilet paper and I was thinking about how I love you. Downstairs, a woman and a dog walk across the street together while a car is attempting its release from the snow; the man inside the car is drinking his coffee. Two neighbors meet for the first time as they wait for the red light while I close my door.

EVERY HALF A SECOND

Everything that is outside is blue-grey. At the tip of the airplane's wing there is a light that flashes every half a second. As I inch my feet slowly through the windowpane, the tips of my toes also become blue-grey and then my calves and knees. I step steadily onto the cold metal body of the wing and two hundred passengers look at me from inside. They are all holding small bags of complimentary peanuts in one hand and waving with the other. A little boy writes a message on the condensation of his window, it says "Don't Worry." My breasts are blue-grey as I reach the tip of the wing where my chest is trembling every half a second.

II.

I call you to say that I am flying over an immense lake that lays beside your city. You tell me that you are there, sitting by the edge of its skirt. I walk hurriedly to the cockpit and I urge the pilot to stop, to linger in this spot just for a while. He chuckles as every person leans towards their windows. And that's when I see you. There you are, in your grey jacket by the blue water.

THE SAME MAN

A man awakes in Monterrey, Mexico after a seven year coma.

He exclaims, Everything has changed!

During his sleep his wife has divorced him and married his brother.

Four months later I am watching him in blue on the TV in my mother's house. He is pacing nervously around the courtroom of *Caso Cerrado* demanding answers.

Everything has changed, he sighs.

The crowd is tense.

They all hold each others' hands, while the audience watching their TVs grasp on to their remote controls or their children.

He says,

Somewhere in the Amazon, there is a man in the airport. In fact, he is the only person in the airport; he is mopping the vast floors as you tap gently on the locked glass doors. He jolts in surprise and says 'You can proceed to Immigration through this hallway.' You've got your passport in your hand. The same man greets you at the counter with a different uniform and he begins 'How long will you be staying? What is the purpose of your visit? Will you be needing a taxi?' You nod your head to his words. Outside the gates of the airport you await your yellow sedan and the same man rolls down the window.

HIGH VOLTAGE TRANSMISSION LINES

When the blackouts stopped Gustavo wept each night in mourning

As children
the blackouts were a great
scavenger hunt
The whole family
sifted through years
of newspaper cutouts of recipes
and flowered placemats
for candles
and rounded up all the candelabra in the house

Our hearts beat ten times too fast at the smell of the wax dripping slowly onto a small ceramic plate in the bathroom Soon the blackouts ripened into routine and if you were afraid of the dark you held on tight to your mother's neck in consolation as everyone gathered around the living room and listened to each other for hours until sleep came

Today I turn 24

Which means it's been 24 years since Abimael Guzman was captured 24 years since Fujimori dissolved Congress and shut down the media stations 24 years since the university students at La Cantuta were assassinated 24 years alive, in a generation that is missing thousands Those who could have been our parents forcibly sterilized As we walk, we walk with all the children whose chance at life was stolen

It is very late years later at your kitchen table eating buttered bread on your flowered placemats remembering when they stopped bombing the high voltage transmission lines

ACIANO

Every Independence Day, July 28, my uncle and his neighbors paint their homes on the sand dunes a new color. A tradition. My Uncle Mario had already chosen the new color he would paint his house that year before he died. In May, he told my grandmother about the exact blue he wanted to paint over the old seafoam green that had covered his wooden walls then, cyan.

Tia Doris waited a week for me to get to Mi Perú so we could release Uncle Mario's ashes into the ocean, which is what he'd always wanted. The ocean had saved him. It was where he ran to hide when he deserted the police force during the civil war, where he would fish every day at El Cerro Gorila in his neighborhood of Pachacutec and where he sat on the rocks just to chill after a long day selling plastic bags, paper plates and cups at the market.

In a journal found in my uncle's home on this day, I read a quote, *que triste es amar sin ser amado, pero mas triste es cagar sin haber almorzado*. Back during the time of Fujimori, my father and uncle came up with La Casa de las Fundas, a store that sold covers for furniture, computers or even water heaters. In a desert like Lima, it is impossible to keep the dust off of anything, it is the landscape and it's in the air. Dad would go around to rich people's homes with his fabric samples, vinyl, nylon, pleather of all kinds of colors for the manufacturing of custom fitted covers (made by my uncle) to envelop all the precious things, to preserve their objects.

WINDOW SEAT

Sometimes when we are sitting on the bus together — I sit in the window seat — I like to pretend I'm looking out at the cars and people passing by, when really I am looking at the reflection of your hands on the window, the way you cross and uncross them, the way you sit with your anger or the thoughts in your head.

I try to push my vision past the reflection into the street, at the woman walking with a dog or at the group of friends laughing, smoking cigarettes on their stoop—but I keep being drawn to the shape of your nails, your fingers and the way they settle on your knees – like sugar at the bottom of your coffee.

I THINK MAYBE I WAS BORN ON A BUS

It's almost like the smell of gasoline, sweat and candy being sold is imprinted on my skin, like the chicha, salsa and cumbia blasting from the bus speakers is in a loop in my head

and all of it became my intense motion sickness and my everyday.

Everything happened on the bus.

Back then, the bus routes depended on the driver's mood and the schedule? On whether or not they had a contender to race them.

That day, the bus—a repainted school bus from the United States—was going so fast it was rattling, trying to keep up with its rival.

We were on our way to visit my brother at the cemetery, to wash his grave. The flowers on my lap were shaking violently.

My father started to shout for the bus to stop and slammed on the windows until they shattered.

I think maybe I wrote my first poem on the bus and

met my mother's boyfriend, Roberto. Later he would live with us in the projects but that day, she introduced him as a friend. He was a musician, he beat on the cajon and also on her.

I think maybe my first words were "esquina baja," letting the driver know I had a destination, a plan to get off this bus and maybe,

I held money for the first time on the bus. It's almost like the coins in my sweaty palms seeped their metal essence into my body.

I could never ride the bus without a bottle of rubbing alcohol to sniff to calm my nausea.

It was on the bus, in Miami when I was 14 that an old white man grabbed my leg and told me how beautiful he thought I was.

I think maybe I made my first friend on the bus, had my first kiss, walked my first steps.

And all of it became my intense motion sickness and my everyday.

THE GHOSTS BETWEEN US

América, I have not been able to write a poem since you murdered Facundo Cabral in Guatemala. This morning, I can see his bleeding body on the cover of a cheap yellow newspaper at the corner of my house.

A few days ago I dreamt that I saw a dog with a hen in its mouth. I have not been able to sleep since.

Yesterday Paula told me that on the day of the earthquake of 1970 she saw a dog with a hen in its mouth. I don't tell her about my dream. Instead I board the next bus that is already too filled with people to take one more. The bus driver is listening to the radio, it tells me that this morning Lima was shaken by a tremor and I ask myself where I might've been for I did not even feel the music of the glasses clashing against one another.

On the bus there is a man with a photograph of a woman in his pocket and a woman, singing a vals by Lucha Reyes.

There is a boy selling lemon candies and it is here that I feel the ghosts between us.

América, one day I go to mass and the priest says that in the city we are bothered by the drizzle and in the fields we cry because of the lack of rain. We live in a city of dust, everybody is covered with it, there is nothing that can blow it away.

I heard someone say that everything's the same but nothing is alike.

Then, I have a fistful of lemon candies in one hand and a newspaper with a photograph of Facundo's body in the other.

PICKING FLEAS OUT OF A KITTEN FOR HOURS

An early morning at la mami's house, she doesn't like to be called grandma – so we don't.

Liter soda bottles with the tops cut off, we fill them up with water from the tank to shower.

Every sound seeps through her thin woven straw walls. The dogs running up and down the sand dune, the neighbors fighting, the boy next door grabs a coin from his pocket and uses it to knock on the bodega owner's fence to buy 3 bread rolls.

The cuyes are squirming in their boxes making their squeaky sounds. I grab one and hold it in my hands, and look into its beady eyes.

My Uncle Mario is still alive, he's awake before all of us – I can hear the sound of the pigeon wings flapping on the tin roof as he pours some grain for them to eat.

Julio is getting ready to go into the city to sell cassettes and watches in the street. He combs his hair to the side, looking into a tiny pink plastic mirror I shoved into the straw wall as a child.

He shines his shoes and tucks his shirt in. Chiqui is jumping all over him and wagging her tail. She's even wearing a little sweater la mami made for her.

MONÓLOGO DE MI PADRE

yo hablo ahora porque tal vez después ya no pueda hablar y no podría decirte estas cosas

"HERE" MEANS WHERE YOUR PEOPLE ARE BURIED

I.
but sometimes they are not buried
they are spread
they expand
they won't be kept in one place

sometimes at their wake
la villana de la novela se aparece,
llena su boca con las galletas que untaste con mantequilla
una por una para el velorio
y se enjuaga con el café
she is here just to say that she did good by your father

but you don't know her

you remember your father's words no has visto toda la película sometimes the version of the movie you were given is easier

but you're grown now

you tread slowly you breathe in and out you take your time

no one taught you how to mourn you didn't expect death you breathe in and out

II. you remember the last time you saw him awake

you're getting in that taxi again your mother is there she is your mother and he is your father who you just walked away from sick in his bed unable to move without that shot of morphine you want it to be easy que te resbale como mantequilla says your mother

in the taxi and it's true you have not seen the whole movie but you caught this last part

the scene where you and your mother visit your sick father on Christmas

CUT

no, the scene where a survivor confronts her rapist

CUT

no, the scene where your white chola mother confronts your black father

CUT

no, the scene where your mother sits at her sick cousin's bedside as he talks about a movie you have not seen in its entirety

sometimes your people are sitting at their own burial unwilling to leave when there's too many debts to be paid

you want it to be easy que te resbale como mantequilla

you tread slowly you breathe in and out you take your time

LAST WORDS

If
anything ever happens
I just want you to know
this vase is made of Murano Crystal
and this
is your great grandfather's dictionary
look here is the book
I have been writing
you know
I can always pray for you
if you want me to

MILAGRO

I.

he woke up
early morning
a hospital bed
a blue building
blue like grey
Lima sky
not ocean
his eyes
still dry
his hands
still cold
cold like Pacific
not like Atlantic

II.

he woke up
early morning
a hospital bed
he said
I have a new
business idea
it came to me
when my eyes
were closed
closed like casket
not like safe

III.

flavors I have so many popsicle flavors watermelon-lime maracuya-peach pineapple-lucuma pisco-strawberry grape-apple tamarind-tangerine burnt sienna-yellow ochre indigo-turquoise violet-crimson blue-grey and we'll make them so refreshing he said so cold cold like Pacific not like Atlantic

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