A SAMPLING OF CONTEMPORARY LATINO POETS: JOSÉ KOZER, RICARDO PAU-LLOSA, GEORDANY CARCASÉS, EMMY PÉREZ, AND BRENDA CÁRDENAS

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One of the most difficult challenges in compiling this brief sample of contemporary Latino poetry was deciding which poets to include. Anthologies published in the 1990s—among them After Atzlan: Latino Poets in the Nineties (1992), Paper Dance: 55 Latino Poets (1995), and Floricanto Si! A Collection of Latina Poetry (1998)—attest to the hundreds of talented Latino/a poets writing in the United States today. Two books published in the last six years, The Wind Shifts: New Latino Poetry (2007) and the massive 2400-page Norton Anthology of Latino Literature (2011) document recently published Latino poets as well as the wide range of established poets found in contemporary Latino literature. Several writers from these texts and comparable anthologies easily can stand beside the five poets represented here.

Part of the criteria for determining these selections stemmed from a personal bias reflecting our ongoing research. Over the last decade we have collaborated with, interviewed, and published scholarly articles on José Kozer and Ricardo Pau-Llosa, Cuban-born writers based in South Florida who have been living in the United States for over fifty years. Born to Czech and Polish immigrants in Havana in 1940, the 73-year old Kozer has written more than 9,000 poems and published over 50 books of poetry. He remains one of the leading proponents of neo-baroque poetry, a tendency in modern Latin American poetics that emphasizes textual density and challenges the notion that meaning is the most significant aspect of poetry. Pau-Llosa was also born in Havana, in 1954. His six books of poetry successfully blend references to music, art, and philosophy. Steeped in the popular and high culture of his native Cuba as well as contemporary art—he has published Rafael Soriano: The Poetics of Light (1998), and dozens of other scholarly works on Latin American painting, sculpture, and photography—Pau-Llosa is one of the leading figures in contemporary Cuban American letters. Collectively these
two writers continue to hold our scholarly interests, and we felt compelled to showcase selections of their poetry here.

In addition to highlighting the achievements of these well-known authors, we also wanted to call attention to a handful of younger poets who have emerged on the poetic scene. The poetry of one of these writers, Geordany Carcasés is being published for the very first time in this special issue of Cuadernos de ALDEEU. A recent Cuban immigrant to the United States, Carcasés is an accomplished actor, musician, and dramaturge whose poetry reflects a natural sense of theater and persona. Two other writers, Emmy Pérez and Brenda Cárdenas, have published most of their work in the last decade. A native Californian, Pérez lives and teaches in southern Texas, whose border proximity to Mexico figures in her poetry. She is the recipient of numerous fellowships and awards (most recently the University of Texas System’s Board of Regents Outstanding Teaching Award), and lends her time and talent teaching writing workshops in Texas and other settings. Cárdenas was born in Wisconsin and grew closer to her Mexican heritage, to which she alludes in her work, after relocating in Chicago. She is comfortable moving across a range of identities—poet, storyteller, political activist, vocalist in a garage band, university professor. She is also an editor and essayist who publishes and writes on contemporary poets. Acknowledging the obvious exclusion of other representative voices, these three writers offer an energetic and fresh poetic perspective that complements the more established voices of Kozer and Pau-Llosa.

Like other Latino poets living in the United States, the poets collected here also share the common ground of Spanish-English bilingualism. All but two of the poets received most of their formal education in the United States, and thus compose the majority of their poetry in English. José Kozer spent his first two decades in Cuba, where he attended the University of Havana. While he has lived in New York and Hallandale, Florida, almost three-quarters of his life—he moved to Spain in 1997 after retiring from teaching at Queens College CUNY—Kozer chooses to write poetry exclusively in Spanish. Similarly, Geordany Carcasés immigrated to the United States in 2009 and composes all of his work in his native Spanish tongue. Pau-Llosa’s first book of poetry, Veinticinco poemas (Twenty-five Poems, 1973), includes poems in both English and Spanish. His six subsequent books of poetry as well as his multiple volumes of art criticism are written in English. Despite their bicultural heritage, Pérez and Cárdenas also write primarily in English. However, over the years Cárdenas has expressed an interest in code switching, a form that allows her to embed Spanish phrases in her poetry. The poetry of both Cárdenas and Pérez has been translated into Spanish and occasionally appears alongside their original poems written in English.

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Like other Latino authors, these poets represent an ongoing legacy of Latino writers. By the 1880s, building on indigenous cultural traditions fused with a literary heritage dating back to the sixteenth century, when Spanish explorers, traders, settlers, and clergy first recorded memoirs, Latino writers were publishing in almost all of the popular genres of the day. They wrote in either Spanish or English, sometimes mixing the two languages. By the 1920s, writing to and for a new influx of Mexican, Caribbean, and South American immigrants, these authors addressed both how to preserve their native heritage and how best to assimilate into their newly adopted land. Later, a wave of writers either discovered their voices in Chicano, Puerto Rican, and other Latino civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s or in exile in the United States during the early years of totalitarian regimes, profoundly influencing future generations of Latino writers.

For the last 40 years, Latino writers have continued to address the issues that interested their literary forbearers, including an ongoing quest for identity and a sense of where they stand as artists in the larger context of American literature. They also write about their connection to the families and communities from which they sprung. They celebrate their varied heritages and work to preserve them through writing, teaching, and public speaking. Protecting civil rights for all Americans has been a further concern. While contemporary Latino writers obviously dwell along various points on the political spectrum, all of them are conscious of their surroundings and typically address the affairs they see there.

Despite these commonalities, these writers also demonstrate the diversity one finds among Latino authors. Commercial publishers still have a tendency to categorize Latino writers as a homogenous group that shares common values and goals. While the poets in this sampling do share similar interests, their work dispels this myth of uniformity by emphasizing the differences between as well as within communities of Latino writers. These differences are particularly noticeable in the linguistic and thematic discourse associated with each poet.

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Of the five poets sampled here, José Kozer is the most prolific. He is also the most willing to destabilize language, to challenge and broaden the limitations of the way we communicate through words. Kozer continues to write in Spanish, even though he lived only 20 of his 73 years in Cuba— “leaving it,” as he writes in one of his poems, “without offspring.” His writing is rooted in a Latin American aesthetic that embraces neo-baroque poetry, whose basic tenets Kozer articulates in the prologue to a Brazilian anthology called Jardim de camaleões, a poesia neobarroca na América Latina (2004). Neo-baroques include “a reasonably big group of poets working in a voracious and productive way from Havana to Patagonia,” Kozer
writes. The neo-baroque poets are neither “traditional [nor] generational” and practice a poetics of “extreme dismemberment, stretching the language to its maximum in what is a polyphonic, choral and non-thematic poetry” (25). Claudio Daniel, the editor of *Jardim* elaborates: “neo-baroque poetry incorporates conflict in its textual procedures, assuming the uneasy essence of the social context through language and its articulation” (19). Kozer’s own poetry reflects this observation.

According to Christopher Winks in *The Brooklyn Rail*, Kozer’s work also “builds on José Lezama Lima’s concept of the ‘imaginary eras,’ where individual creations, expressions, and existences from distinct and often widely separated historical periods become reinterpret[ed] […] within the poetic image” (n.p.). Thus while a poem like “Gramática de Papá,” included in this issue, portrays Cuba, family, and home, Kozer’s poetry reaches considerably beyond the inter-phase between two languages. This larger aesthetic universe is evident in a recent book of poetry called *Tokonoma* in which Kozer translates Japanese and Chinese sources into Spanish.

The poetic space of Ricardo Pau-Llosa is equally inclusive. Based in Miami, Pau-Llosa is at times pigeonholed as a writer too focused on Cuba, whose communist rule he fled with his family in 1960 when he was six years old. He still remembers his Cuban past and subsequent repercussions as evident in poems like “For the Cuban Dead,” reprinted here, where the persona asserts, “There is no enough in exile” and “Memory is the heart’s gravity” (qt. in *Writer’s Chronicle* 14). In an interview published in 2010, Pau-Llosa candidly states:

Rather than seeing any change in my ‘voice’ on the theme of Cuba, I see an amplification of that same voice to include other scenarios where the individual who bears a historical destiny and has understood its searing lessons is seeking to make his point to smug, misinformed people who assume they are intellectually, politically, and morally my superiors. (9)

However, even a cursory review of his work reveals that Pau-Llosa feels most at home celebrating “the inherent theatricality of all experiences” (12). As he does in *Vereda Tropical* (1999), an earlier poetry collection, Pau-Llosa draws on a number of sources, among them European masters such as Bosch, Titian, Troyon, Brueghel, and Zurbarán, whose “intensely visual digestion of the world never ceases” (10) to influence his poetry. Pau-Llosa’s intellectual thought has also been influenced by Heidegger, Bakhtin, Canetti, and other writers and philosophers. Edmund Husserl is probably the single deepest influence on his understanding of the way an artist observes the world. Equally profound on his poetry is the music of Cuba, its “soul […] with every other art form serving as the secretaries to that soul” (11). Educated
in the United States, Pau-Llosa composes his poetry almost exclusively in English. The two new poems included in this issue of Cuadernos are part of a forthcoming book of loose self-parodies entitled Man Poems.

Geordany Carcasés represents a third generation of Cuban poets and the other writer in this collection who composes in Spanish. His background is in theater, and the rich, visual texture of his poetry is one of its prominent features. The compositions of Carcasés are well-crafted and often juxtapose images. They also avoid enjambment, precluding any kind of formal grammatical arrangement between lines. His poetry contains stories, but the narratives are conveyed through fragments that offer a complex and non-linear view of the world. Carcasés distances himself from the ornate and philosophical construction that sometimes tends to characterize poetry of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. This doesn’t mean his poetry lacks provocation or is incapable of generating reflection. Rather, it tantalizes and demands a conscious level of involvement in the abundant web of cultural references contained in his writing. This engagement is particularly apparent in a poem like “Mi padre murió en duelo,” where Carcasés locates his father in the eighteenth century; the names of places play a role in sound and meaning, but they don’t pretend to establish anything beyond a fiction triggering different emotional responses.

Emmy Pérez and Brenda Cárdenas published their first books of poetry after the new millennium. Both authors also appear in Francisco Aragón’s anthology of emerging Latino poets, The Wind Shifts. Pérez’s poems have been published in a number of poetry magazines, beginning when she was an MFA student at Columbia University in the 1990s. Cárdenas’s poetry has also appeared in numerous publications, among them Between the Heart and the Land / Entre el corazón y la tierra, an anthology she co-edited with Johanny Vásquez Paz in 2001. Both poets’ early work also reflect their Mexican-American roots, but as Juan Felipe Herrera writes in the preface to Wind Shifts, this “question of identity” for younger contemporary poets “is more about the moment, or better yet, the furious fast-filters that grasp it, that tear it apart and taste it” (xv). For Pérez and Cárdenas the Spanish-English hybridization involving Mexico and the United States has already taken place, and such a complex inter-phase cannot be reduced to simplistic clichés. For both, identity in the current sense of the term is fragmented and evasive, more akin to the postmodern writings of Jean-François Lyotard that challenge notions of universality and grand narratives. The flavor of these writers can be found as easily in “Diego Rivera’s Aztec marketplace” (Solstice 18) as well as in the art of Allen Ginsberg, Cesare Pavese, or Ana Mendieta.

While the presence of the Latino voice does not disappear in the poetry of Emmy Pérez, it grows smaller. In “The Border,” included in this sampling, Pérez recalls the ordeal of passing from Mexico to the United States as an
American citizen with Hispanic features. However, a prose poem like “The Breathing,” also published here, includes no direct references to specific cultures. Pérez’s poetry is driven less by theme than by language and imagery, as displayed in a new poem like “Border Twins, Confluences.” This writing is composed with names of Hispanic places only. When she does emphasize theme, Pérez is elusive and often reaches beyond the Latino world. It is not unusual to find “Budweiser,” “Sanskrit,” “Old English,” “Latin,” and “Old High German” as proper nouns alongside “Rio Bravo,” “Santa Teresa,” “El Camino,” and “palo verde.”

This non-traditional seeking of identity is also present in the work of Brenda Cárdenas. As we see in “Tín-tun-teros,” an early poem reprinted here, Cárdenas seeks a more inclusive identity by composing her work with iconic expressions related to Latino drumming—“timbaleros,” “congoseros,” “bongoseros”—as well as more generic English terms such as “drummer” and “percussionists,” opening the space for music beyond the Latino experience. The rest of the poem includes few direct references to Latino culture. Similarly, two additional poems included in this sampling accentuate the openness of Cárdenas’s verse and suggest references beyond the Latino world. For example, in “Rupture” the Latino references come in the title and subsequent epigraph that expresses the poem’s origin in a painting by avant-garde artist Remedios Varo. In “Nexus,” an ekphrastic poem based on a work by Ana Mendieta, few Hispanic expressions surface. In Cárdenas’s poetry, one identifies a thematic line but also a poetry cohabiting with a rich texture of images and a keen awareness of language as a poet’s primary tool.

The five poets sampled here reflect the linguistic interchange brought about by biculturalism and by being physically, intellectually, or emotionally rooted in another land. This special issue of Cuadernos includes at least one previously published poem by each writer as well as two poems published here for the first time.
Works Cited


**Gramática de papá**

Había que ver a este emigrante balbucir verbos de yiddish a español, había que verlo entre esquelas y planas y bolcheviques historias naufragar frente a sus hijos, su bochorno en la calle se parapetaba tras el dialecto de los gallegos, la mercancía de los catalanes, se desplomaba contundente entre los andrajos de sus dislocadas, conjugaciones, decía va por voy, ponga por pongo, se zumbaba las preposiciones, y pronunciaba foi, joives decía y la calle resbalaba, suerte funesta déspota la burla se despilfarra por las esquinas, y era que el emigrante se enredaba con los verbos, descargaba furibunda acumulación de escollos en la penuria de trabalenguas, hijos poetas producía arrinconado en los entrepaños del número y desencanto de negociaciones, y ahora sus hijos lo dejaban como un miércoles muerto de ceniza, sus hijos se marchaban hilvanando castellanos, ligerosimso sus hijos redactando una sintaxis purísima, padres a hijos dilatando la suprema exaltación de las palabras, húmedo el emigrante se encogía entre los últimos desperfectos de su vocabulario rojo, último padecía para siempre impedido entre las lágrimas del Niemen, fin de Polonia.

Desasimiento

Haber sido Teócrito, que no diera.

Nada de Pound ni Zukofsky y Góngora (Trilce) o Quevedo: Teócrito y la peste a ovejas, de postre crema de bellotas, mascar menta para el mal aliento, controlar la presión mirando brotar agua de los manaderos, volver los carneros al redil, balar (yo también) al fornicar.

Me tocó lo que me tocó: nacer en un país bullanguero, crecer en ciudades de encofrado y hormigón: la vida material afarolarme, querer ser monje, no pasa día en que no medite, me concentre, contemple, el dinero: y de paso por dónde le entra el agua al coco.

Quiero huir, no soy Tolstoi. ¿Huir cuando me llevo bien con mi mujer? De locos, ¿Huir a qué Astapovo, a qué Cáucaso? Ni en La Florida ni en Cuba quedan guardabosques que ofrezcan una casa pequeña de madera, la mesa basta, la silla coja de Fray Luis. Me quedo.
Píramo y Tisbe tiñeron de negro las moras con su sangre, yo hasta el final viviré derramando inanidad, inercia bacterial, ideal sublimado pus.

Can destino, garrote peregrino a ningún lugar. Hueca hojalata al caminar por descuidados parques (oteros, no) de la (a medias) ciudad: échame, Teócrito, una mano al final, cédeme pinta de zagal, brocal, la artesa y el hórreo, el zurrón y a voleo, bichero en mano horadar el surco donde enterrar tiras y trizas del inútil papel, papelazo que escribiendo hice.

**Fábula**

Masco maloja, sentado a un pupitre, el álgebra me amedrenta, acudo a la madre que no sabe nada, sólo conoce el número por la cuenta de la lavandería, regatearle al reloj sus horas, que qué quiero. Irme a pie, conocer los bajos fondos de la gran ciudad, dormir bajo los puentes, colgar
la muerte de un farol:
ser de la banda de
los bijiritas, salaz,
una mazorca de maíz
hervida de almuerzo,
y qué que no la digiero.
¿Digiero bien el álgebra? ¿La maloja?
¿La maleta de cuero viejo del padre cargada
de escribanías, péndolas,
tintas irreverentes que
todo lo permutan, verbos
que hacen sufrir? Tengo
ganas de soplar la vela
y despertar. Flabelos
en mano dos vestales
egiptias abanicarme,
a Fermina rozarle el
trasero con la punta
glande, el bálano erizo que ocultamos
a la madre. Su falopio.
Todo se complica
por gusto. A qué
esos estudios,
pendones y actos
cívicos, uniformes
(almidonados)
(cuánto no dice la
palabra uniforme).
Leer a Rimbaud
que para algo tengo
diecisiete años, y
estudiar por mi cuenta.
Dejarme de vainas.
Quemar los puente. Al
billar. A la Corte de los
Milagros. ¿O no soy,
mamá, mamá, un
librepensador, entre
rufianes? Cama y
libro y un pitillo
manos entrelazadas
por detrás al cuello
mejor una cachimba
camisa obrera
pantalón de sarga
venderles marfil
a los europeos (lo
revenden a los chinos
para sus misterios)
me haré rico en el
mercado afrodisíaco.

Entra, blande, me corta la respiración, la digestión,
el resto se repliega:
y voy poco a poco
apartándome del
pupitre, suerte
que me voy: al
heno, a las
coníferas, graneros,
desmantelar

a
Cuba.
RICARDO PAU-LLOSA (Havana, Cuba)


For the Cuban Dead

Once they were men fully because they belonged, and everywhere they looked and chatted and sipped a bit of coffee, whisked away a fly with a wrist or jolted a newspaper readably straight, or flirted, or worried about the world and where the damn country was going as a trolley rolled and curtains dipped and bulged breast-like and hid again in the proper window. They were home and citizens of it and dared and loved and were decent and stole and killed and loved again. They were home. How like the root in the earth, the crease in the linen, the wind rending the cloud, the growl in the hunger, the pavement sprayed with waves crashing against the sea wall. How like all right things in the mind of place, they jostled and failed, learned and betrayed. Like coins in pockets made for them they cried stridently or simply tinkled in murmurs, and it didn’t matter if talk or life had substance. Right of place was substance.

There is no enough in exile. Not enough anger, and the blanket of safety always leaves the feet bare. And it is here, no matter how clean and golden, that one learns how different the wrist and the fly and the shot of wave, how once never stops calling although the law of distance deafens. Memory is the heart’s gravity.
The accent of their children becomes unbearably alien, a dampness from the sidewalk creeping past the thin sole and into the ignored sock. Now nothing escapes notice and the balance is always against.

And it hits them, these never again composed, that the time to see and hear was then, when rightness held even the stormy evils of the quotidian in the same palm with the trash of years of seconds and the kissed joys.

_Then_, as we have come to know, was the proper place to gaze at the dust of butterfly panoplies, ponder the calligraphic crud on china, relinquish decorous ears to taut goatskins, wash in the lace of Sunday clouds, and otherwise pay attention with one’s whole life to shadows knitting five centuries of incomparable capital, field’s antique jewel, and the cradling shore.

God it was who let them die filled with late understanding, so who dares say we the innocent lurk unpunished in the works and days?

First published in _Parable Hunter_ (2008)

**Cardinal Sins Man**

When parking meters are broken, a virgule-slashed capital P flashes its directive on the little screen: No Parking. More than absurd, it is vanity, for had the meter been in working order and willing to glutton his quarters, then he would be spared the rage born of this indignity, looking around, feeling ridiculous questioning himself—Should I spineless obey and move my car
or leave it there in this perfectly good space?
It is not the space that is out of order
but the state’s ability to collect tribute.
A Mercedes has pulled close
in tints, chatting on a phone, grinning,
guessing the man is pondering
what to do. That greedy Mercedes,
thinks the man, lustng after his space,
waiting to see what good citizenry
will bequeath him. He is torn,
but the scale is tipped by the CEO shine,
and the man slouches off on foot, his face
dished to the ground as if receiving
signals from the pavement. Look at that,
the grin behind the tints must be thinking,
that bum’s too cheap to find another space,
too lazy to give up what he should.

Grail Man

The man chopsticks ice cubes
in his Dewar’s with two black stirs
and watches how they dip
in their sleek amber veritas
to rise again more less than more.
Cubes like belugas
wheeling into the sea,
spacecraft or meteors
soaped in a galactic honey
junkyard of free slipperies.
He knows the delight
of entertaining impossibles
as he gestures his fingers to seize
the jelly-lit gems, the fat coins
of cold teeth ducking
into this corneal pond.
Trapped yet derisive of solids—
the way the plot of his marriage
slumps into the lava
of that sea, memory,
enamored with itself.
GEORDANY CARCASÉS (Havana, Cuba)

An actor and a director of theater, Geordany Carcasés moved to the United States in 2009. He started writing poetry only recently. He lives in Miami, where he is also a vocalist in Luyano Band, an eclectic group of musicians based out of South Florida.

[Está Job mirando por una ventana]

Está Job mirando por una ventana
Lo recuerda todo
Su rostro expresa el aspecto feroz de ardilla habitual
Suena un piano en la alcoba
Grita para oír por un instante el alma llena de paz
La brisa levanta polvo y en instantes parpadean los ojos
El mismo ardor profundo que provoca la luz ...pensó.
Job parado en la ventana
y las hojas de los árboles cayendo por el peso del estiércol de los [pájaros]
A los lejos con dificultad observa unos soldados cargando barras de [leña]
El ramaje seco al hombre sujetado por aquellos brazos
Construyen pequeñas cruces
El reloj de la hora
Es medio día
Job sigue parado en su ventana
Publica una lágrima
y el polvo se queda quieto.

[Una mujer sin sombrero]

Una mujer sin sombrero
Huye del peligro asirio
No se detiene en la conservación de su canción
Y se convierte en el centro de la estupidez mundial
Me ayuno el ritual de mis manos torrentes
Y el vacío de mi infancia alma
Ahora toda invierno otra vez.
[Mi padre murió en duelo por un contrabandista inglés]

Mi padre murió en duelo por un contrabandista inglés
En mil setecientos treinta en Portugal

Mi padre murió por un infarto masivo mientras violaba una clarividente
En mil setecientos quince en Amsterdam

Mi padre murió de la peste y fue lanzado desde un barco en el Atlántico
En mil setecientos cuarenta y cuatro después de salir de África

Mi padre murió a la horca bajo las órdenes de Tupac Amaru
En mil setecientos ochenta y dos en el Cuzco

Mi padre murió destripado por cocodrilos después de incendiar sus telares e hilanderías
En mil setecientos ochenta y cinco en el noreste del Brasil

Mi padre murió atragantado por su propia lengua mientras lo exorcizaba un apacible cura rural
En mil setecientos noventa en boca de tigre Uruguay

Mi padre lo mató el Siglo de las Luces.
EMMY PÉREZ (Orange, California)

Emmy Pérez attended the University of Southern California and Columbia University, where she received an MFA in Creative Writing. Her poetry has appeared in numerous journals, among them Prairie Schooner and New York Quarterly. Solstice, her first book of poetry, was published by Swan Scythe Press in 2003. With the River on our Face, a new book of poetry, is forthcoming. Pérez currently teaches in the Department of English at the University of Texas-Pan American.

The Breathing

The sunflower seed cracking in the parrot’s beak; the cassava connected to earth, filtering rain; the pink afterbirth of sky, leaf, and beast; the waking from dreams to our loved one’s sleeping; the waking from horror to the bells of the distant cathedral; the reverberations of family, gunshots and home traveling in our blood, congealing in the heart, in the stomach; the small stokes weakening brains, erasing equations, retaining: deer drawn on the damp walls of its caves, beats on thick skins of drums, flutes carved from trees, reeds intimate with tongues.

First Published in LUNA (1998), Ray González, ed. This poem also appears in Solstice (2003 & 2011)

The Border

Abuelita, old and shaking, fumbles through her purse searching for her green card. There are eight cars ahead of us—she begins to sweat.

Chiclets, serapes, ceramic piggy banks. We buy none of these things the gringos do, only mangos on sticks, roasted white corn smeared with butter and salt, tamales steaming from the pot.

Dogs foam at the mouth, their skins tight on bones, the street hot on their padded paws.
Last year, the booth stopped us, searching the camper with discotec spotlights.

*Any animals? Any fruit?*

Rigoberto made it over many years ago in the trunk of a Honda, holding his breath beneath wool blankets.

I am aware of my East L.A. accent, father’s broken English, the parrot suffocating in mother’s purse.

*Any animals? Any fruit?*

*American citizen.*

As we speed off into San Diego, J. T. and I sigh, and remove los cuetes, the illegal firecrackers stuffed safely in our underwear.

First published in *LUNA* (1998), Ray González, ed. This poem also appears in *Solstice* (2003 & 2011)

**Border Twins, Conf uences**

Ciudad Juárez~El Paso, Reynosa~Hidalgo, Nuevo Laredo~Laredo, Matamoros~Brownsville, Roma~Miguel Alemán, Río Grande City~Ciudad Carmargo Reynosa~Granjeno~Hidalgo, Los Ebanos~Diaz Odaz Presidio~Ojinaga, *El Diablo en Texas*, Eagle Pass~Piedras Negras, Ciudad Acuña~Del Rio, Boquillas~Big Bend, Río Conchos, Río Chama, San Juan, Río Salado, Devils River, Pecos, Río Álamo,
Rio San Rodrigo, Conejos, Jemez, Rio Puerco, Santa Fe River. Big river, posoge, paslápaane, hañapakwa, mets’ichi chena (& Tó Ba’áadi, Navajo/Diné).\(^1\)

### Staying in the Flood

Why the tom  
Spraying the screen  
Window, why  
Floodwater  
Leftover from  
Hurricane Alex  
A spring after last summer  
Weed seeds sprouting  
Downriver

Why the woodpecker’s  
Off and on wing  
Pause causing  
Vertigo, why  
Confuse herons with  
Egrets, Aztlán:  
*Land of white herons.*

Why the sap stains  
Like accidents  
Why the border patrol  
Woman in a blue truck  
With camper big  
Enough to haul  
Livestock. Why  
The anacahuita  
Flowers, why one  
Giant swallowtail butterfly

Why the debris  
Of paloverde flowers  
Gathering on asphalt

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\(^1\) River names and confluences from Wikipedia entry on the Rio Grande. When Río has an accent mark, the river is also in México (Rio Bravo).
Edges like
The path of hair
Under your belly button
Or a path of marigold
Petals welcoming
The dead home

And why the busted-
Up nopal like a bullet
Target or a Just-
Married sign
In April
Strung with
Tecate cans
Hitched to an
El Camino
Why is it still
Blooming
Yellow roses?
**BRENDA CÁRDENAS** (Milwaukee, Wisconsin)

Brenda Cárdenas received a B.A. in English from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Michigan. She is the author of *From the Tongues of Brick and Stone* (Momotombo Press, 2005) and *Boomerang* (Bilingual Press, 2009). In 2001, she co-edited *Between the Heart and the Land/Entre el Corazon y la tierra: Latina Poets in the Midwest* (Abrazo Press). She is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

**Poema para los Tin-Tun-Teros**

Este para los timbaleros, los bateristas, los tin-tun-teros, los que tocan con cucharas en sus estufas con lápices en sus escritorios con uñas y nudillos en mesas, muebles, sus propias cabezas con puños contra paredes y dedos en las espinas y curvas de sus amantes, danzantes.

Este para los congüeros, los tamboristas, los bongoseros, los que nunca descansan con sus tacones siempre golpeando la piel del piso, zapateando en sus sueños llenos de maracas, güiros y claves, estos bailadores con pasos tan suaves y caderas que se mueven como sus *high hats* y farolas.

Este para los timbaleros, los bateristas, los tin-tun-teros. Son chingones con sus tormentas de platillos, sus juegos de palillos que vuelan como alas. ¿Qué malas sus trampas que no nos permiten trabajar ni dormir, solamente bailar y cantar, cantar y bailar y a veces mover la tierra un poquito.

**Poem for the Tin-tun-teros**

This for the timbaleros, percussionists, tin-tun-teros, those who tap with spoons on their stoves with pencils on their desks with nails and knuckles on tables, beds, their own heads with fists against walls and fingers on the spines and curves of their lovers, dancers.
This for the congueros, drummers, bongoseros,
those who never rest
with their staccato heels always hammering the skin of the floor
stomping in their dreams filled with maracas, guiros and claves,
these dancers with steps so smooth
and hips that move like their high hats and snares.

This for the timbaleros, percussionists, tin-tun-teros.
They are bad asses with their cymbal storms
their games of sticks that fly like wings. How scampish
their tricks that won’t let us work or sleep
only dance and sing, sing and dance
and sometimes move the earth a little.

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appears in Boomerang (2009).

Rupture
(after Remedios Varo’s painting Ruptura, 1955)

The Carmelite folds like a bat
into her mousy wings. Eyes
from all six windows conspire
flight, cloistered gaze shifting
in a suspicious wind. Everything
curls into this hallowed eve: snails
coiling from the veins of leaves,
curtains unlashing—sprung whips.
Cast out, a flurry of onion-skin spells
flock to ink. Whose vow will break
against an orange sky? Whose swoop
and whir, whose murmur?
Sister is a closed umbrella
gathering thunder in the V of her cloak,
a storm in her double-crossed step.
Nexus
(after Ana Mendieta’s Silueta series, earth-body works, 1973-80)

This body always compost—
hair a plot of thin green stems
snowing a shroud of petals,
skin mud-sucked to bark,
trunk only timber isthmusing
river banks, each finger
a dirty uprooting.

How many stones did I have
to swallow before my legs
believed their own weight?
Dropped into silhouette
of thigh and hip, a ridge
of ossicles crushed to fine
white whispers. Listening

to Cuilapán’s orphaned pleas, one
twin lingers outside the nave; one
cloistered in a vaulted niche,
its ledge of red roses edging
her blood-soaked robes.
Meat, bone—a deer’s skitter
and bolt from the arrow,
an iguana’s severed tail, spiny tracks.

They say we dig our own graves.
I have laid me down
in a Yagul tomb, outlined
my island arms with twig, rock,
blossom, mud. Her pulse with fire,
glass and blood. I’ve raised
myself in the earth’s beds, left
this map, this exiled breath.