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SELECTED POEMS

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English Studies in Latin America
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Selected Poems

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¹ Constanza Contreras is a PhD candidate in the English at the University of Michigan. Her dissertation project looks at racial configurations in the Americas from a hemispheric lens to complicate notions of Latinidad that have historically erased indigeneity and blackness. She focuses on visual and literary narratives and their lingering effects on the racial dynamics of contemporary nation states, and the intersections of race, gender and global indigenities. Originally from Chile, Constanza is now living in Dublin, Ireland after four years of being lost in the American Midwest. A poet and illustrator, her work was recently featured in the anthology *The Breakbeat Poets Vol. 4: LatilNEXT*.

The Excoriation of Prickly Pears

Girls of an age... are anchored in a faultline. It's a wonder they survive at all.

-Linda Gregerson

The woman tells her daughter with
dermatillomania to stay still,
do not fidget,
do not tear the scab
that keeps on growing on
her scalp,
running down her face like
little feet of years, of ghosts
past, of her mother and
her mother
and her mother.

The mother tells the girl to stop,
*no man will love a woman with scars,
with a face full of holes.*
Men only love the moon in poems and epics.

No man will ever love a woman with scars,
and so she takes the nails to the already prickled
skin, and scratches
scratches
scratches; an itch that cannot be tamed.

The girl feels the holes taking over,
taking her whole. She wonders at seven
if her mother's fear is real, and by twelve
she knows that to bury a bullet inside a hole is the
best type of armor.

By fifteen she collects scabs on her wrists, her breasts
and back, and on the inside of her thighs. She knows
no man will drench himself in desire and ask, what
story does this one tell? *Men*, her mother says,
care only for what's between the legs, no time
to sing the stories your skin is carving in media res
of adolescent sex.

Still, she marks the places where
no man will ever love her,
wonders how they fit now that
her skin has grown to that of
a tiger, legs and ass striped,
--the body a straitjacket,
struggling to contain this *thing*
that lusts for endless space.

But the girl knows better
than to take up space.

The girl lives now in a house without mirrors.
Her lovers —for she is loved— hide
her weapons of choice:
tweezers, comedone extractors,
nails, cuticle cutters,
hairpins, knives.
She waits for the time they will leave,
the time they'll squint their eyes and realize
hers is the face of a moon, the skin of a tiger.

Her mother has told her,
nobody will love you with a perforated face,
and she wishes she'd said the word *man* again, thinks
one will love you with the skin of nopales
and prickly pears,
so what is one feline stripe more,
even if self-inflicted,
a blade, a scratch marked rather than
the body
writing its story from the inside,
progesterone and muscle and fat?

And so the girl paints her body
with more stripes, and even when
Apollo tries to heal her heart with his
tender touch, all she can see is the burned
kisses he leaves, another man leaving traces
on her, shadows with no permanence, kisses
left on every spot she'd scratched before,
Icarus incarnate.

TO MY UNBORN CHILD

My daughter,

I have denied your coming since I
was fourteen,

yet now you come before me
in dreams,

with the eyes of the man I claim to love.

My daughter,

I walk with the uncertainty of your

existence, having denied you a fruit
of my womb, out loud, since time

immemorial, casting my land barren
for too long, willingly,

the woman in me more woman she thinks.

As I wake up,

I beg of you,

let our encounters be but in dreams.

My daughter,
I have given everything to avoid your arrival.

I have feared your smile since the first pulse
of my clit.

I was taught to fear you the same
way I was taught to fear myself. Of my body
I have made a toxic wasteland, its plagues
leaving their traces and scarring my face with
their feet. And as the faithful colonized I
welcome them with my arms open, set alarms
for their arrival,
mark my body's song around their schedule.

I have dismantled this house to avoid being your host.

I have feared your arrival,
the dichotomy you would carry under your arm while
you knock at the door.

Yet from my bed you reach up from within my womb and tickle my brain with warm lullabies that
walk their small steps from my cleft to my neck and nostrils, the way the man I love does, while I
feel his tender body,

and I imagine yours between us.

Atacama

(1)

The year before you left, we crossed the desert.
Eight hours of dry mountains saw our bodies
safeguarded by a tin can traversing a reddish brown landscape.
My body sat next to you on the passenger seat,
not able to put her finger on that which was already withering.

(2)

I remember thinking, this desert is not like the movies
but in a way it was:
since memory set its eyes on screens,
I had seen women searching, dusted ankles and hands, for signs
of life. Had they been looking for water, I wondered, like the scientists?
Hollywood has so many times used these colors
as a Martian background. Were they looking for water
just like the scientists were looking through white ears up,
mile by stellar mile, in search of their own hope for life?

(3)

Only this land can hold such contradiction:
A vast desert falling into the sea. The Pacific a graveyard,
the dry lands that kill actually protecting the bodies,
the salt curing their skin and in eight hours of nothing,
the sun raises between the mountains, as always, a witness to
these mummifications.
I think about the ghosts that lift the dust
as we drive. My mother says,
hay que tenerle mas miedo a los vivos
que a los muertos, and I do:
I fear the living who brought the bodies here.

(4)

You would think water is relief. You would think that.
After all, when scientists look at the sky in Paraná
and in ALMA they look up for watery souls
in the stars, in the galaxies,
while so many others look at the dust,
searching for what the desert has dried, hoping
for a follicle that allows recognition,
finding at times the sneaker they saw their son wear that day he left,
the memory of him fixed on the door's threshold.
In the driest desert, under blue light, they hold on to that
that shoe like it were a thousand clear rivers.

(5)

The desert is at least merciful. The desert kept their bodies, I think.
A land of contradictions, the driest desert stands next to the biggest ocean,
and we all know, oceans are not friendly water here. Oceans are
not merciful with our bodies. Oceans leave no trace, oceans are too
overflowing with life to care about sparing that half one falling,
wrapped in plastic, a body open that opens and lashes the surface
the pacific un-pacified, their life given. In this land, you can plunge
truth from a puma onto the sea.

Fences

I put up a fence between you and me,
made of the things I saw in our future
— too fragile to last outside of my foresight.

You see, I always build walls,
as an alien in these flat lands, with no peaks
to rise naturally, to secure the epidermis of

our bodies, with a compass broken, up-side
down, with the spring saliendo a borbotones
from my feet while inside the leaves are falling,

I still oppose the walls dictators erect to delineate
borders. Perhaps the borders I set for us are
no more stable than those of a paper nation:

Illusions, made up shapes held only by fire
and toxic men — patriotism, the liquor that
fuels its citizens, that fuels these dotted lines.

Walls that tear up bodies, that unbraided histories,
that raspan los sonidos de la bocas, re-educan
lenguas con otras lenguas imperiales.

Monuments erected on a graveyard aptly built
on stolen land. Ni el verdugo ni el undertaker should
hold the keys to where the bones meet their people.

I oppose these walls yet here I am, hands busy on
mud and hay, patching up walls as it rains and melts

with every storm that passes.

Secretly, as I build the wall you once asked me to
tear down, I leave crevices open, I plan for
estructuras endeables. I hope others will come in.

I pray for my wall secretly,
to be porous, to let them through.