

Three Poems

Brendan Corcoran

ETERNAL SPRING¹

(For Manrique Saenz Calderon, Huehuetenango, Guatemala)

I.

On my concrete roof at dusk,
I often sat to watch
those last few bright minutes
pass through the colored bands
that streak the sky at sunset—
and marked a poultice
at the edge of sight
drawing ferocity from day,
as if the wounds that festoon
the earth like so many bright
blooms risen from paradise
might be left less raw.
From this vantage, I see still
a graveyard on a hillside,
where silhouettes, like rubble
backed up against a wall
oppose the firefall
fading, cooling, leaving
everything charred
with dry-eyed night.
Beneath the stars' bouquet
I shiver at the word
only heard here: *celaje*².

¹ Guatemala, where I was a US Peace Corps volunteer living in Huehuetenango in the north-central highlands from 1989-1991, is commonly known as "the land of eternal spring." This has always been a tragically ironic name given the country's brutal history of civil war and genocide against the Mayan language-speaking people that began effectively with the 1954 coup and ended with the 1996 peace accords. I lived just outside of Huehuetenango.

² *Celaje* is the Spanish word for cloudscape, but in Guatemala it describes more precisely those colored bands arcing across the sky at sunset.

II.

Even amidst friends,
all that's happened here
is spoken of beneath
the breath. Heads bowed,
we dumb-show nods
and shakes above a table
laden with *boquitas*³, bottles,
glasses, limes, salt, ice—
when *fútbol's* ascendancy
bars silence, lightens
what we know.

Above us, your *suegro's*⁴ paintings,
brilliant oils, as alive as kind,
oppose the windows' fluid darkness
into which this light and laughter
flows, facing the garden wall
with shadow. From *la montaña*,⁵
we are a pinprick in the valley
floor—our sympathies exposed.

³ Boquitas are appetizers enjoyed with drinks.

⁴ Suegro means father-in-law. The suegro of my friend was the great Guatemalan painter, Roberto Gonzalez Goyri, who created well-known images of indigenous campesinos (subsistence farmers); some of his paintings adorned these walls.

⁵ La montaña, or mountain in English, is also used colloquially in Guatemala for the countryside in general—where so much of the genocidal violence took place. My friend's home was outside Huehuetenango at the foot of the Cuchumatanes mountain range.

ANOTHER LANGUAGE QUESTION
(Todos Santos Cuchumatan,⁶ Guatemala)

It all ticks, ticks, ticks, ticks, like that bicycle the old man peddled around
the church patio on such a tight tether you wanted him to fly
furiously and straight away, down and out of the valley without,
above all, the story he told you as the sun's rise forced down
the mountain's rim, infusing the dry, thin air with platinum—
the story of a man your age, his son, a school-teacher teaching
his forbidden Mayan tongue. Might the alabaster light that morning
have slipped in under the night's chill and tented it back up into the blue?
Could roosters and a bus coughing up above while winding down
to where we stood a moment in the sun keep such night at bay?
No. That smile hooked on lips undone, a quartz calm, the vacuum clarity
of the story just standing there, a day of eyes swallowed by their pupils:
trucks rumbling in the night, boots churning the church patio,
the door shaking still after the entry and exit with the young man,
your age, too scared to say anything to anyone, nothing of course
useful, nothing at all, as if something could be recalled on that march
up a rocky, steep defile absent the soles of his feet. What language
becomes this old man peddling, peddling black circles around the sun?

⁶ Todos Santos Cuchumatan, Guatemala, is a small, mostly indigenous, Mam-speaking village in the highlands of Guatemala. I worked there as a Peace Corps volunteer in 1990 and 1991. In 1982, a unit of the Guatemalan army entered the town looking for guerilla sympathizers. Some 50 people were massacred. In 1991, I met the father of one of the tortured and murdered people. This man's son taught Mam in the village school, even though such indigenous language education had been prohibited.

CANDELABRAS
(Chiantla,⁷ Guatemala)

Brass bullet casings
by the *quinta*⁸ feed
a brick furnace
worked by hand bellows

in a soot-dark, low
adobe forge. The liquid
light that issues seems
uncoupled from the reports

of machinegun-fire
breaching the classroom quiet
of an elementary school
just off the army base.

This sound of perforated air
might just as well be riveted
to the fantasy that it could be
also something else:

the sundering of the last fibers
as a tree is felled,
the stuttering reluctance
of rusted nails drawn

from bone-dry planks,
raindrops bursting into mist
against corrugated tin. It assuages:
one thing merely being *like*

⁷ Chiantla is a small town just up the mountain from Huehuetenango, where I lived while in the Peace Corps. The village was famous for brass forges that recycled bullet casings from Huehuetenango's military base.

⁸ A quintal in Guatemalan Spanish is a unit of mass equivalent to approximately 100 pounds.

and not that other thing itself.

Drizzled into roughhewn
molds of fired clay,
the cadmium yellow

metal congeals in time,
and from their chrysalides
candelabras emerge begrimed.
Washed and buffed by hand,

even put to the wheel,
no cleansing, no polishing
removes all the pits and scars
from the bright surfaces.

Dr. Brendan Corcoran is an Associate Professor of English at Indiana State University, where he works on twentieth-century and contemporary Irish poetry, the elegy, as well as the intersection of literature and climate change. He has published on the poetry of John Keats, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, and Ciaran Carson. Currently, he is at work on a book exploring Seamus Heaney's elegiac practices. From July 1989 to October 1991, he served in the United States Peace Corps and was based in Huehuetenango, Guatemala.