

LEAF ON DRUM RIVER

1.

It starts with the drum
tum, tum,
starts with beat, heart,
the blessing
the sending.
Through his song, his drum,
she sends me.

No, it starts before the drum.
When you come into the world
red hair
little fox,
I light a fire.

Another says, come!
I say, yes.

“Hello beautiful!
I’ve heard rumours
they ended Border Patrol.
Now there’s love patrol,
mostly women.
They unblocked the dams.
opened the rivers. Did you know?
Panama Canal has been filled in again.
We’re back
to sailboats!
Trump has confessed his crimes.
He is in a
retirement centre — a
a place for healing
With his friend,
Uribe.
They are only allowed to
look after the plants.
They aren’t allowed anywhere
near the chicken coop.”

Ha, ha, says
the lady in the garden.
We are out picking dinner.
“Marjorie gave me this one
and that.”
For sixty years
she has had this dirt
under her nails.
My grandmother to her
and her to me.
She held my little hand as
I now hold hers,
folding our fingers around the
stem, and leaf, and seed.

Ha, ha! she says,
and she and her moth-loving old man
put me on the train.

The train goes, and
goes and drum beats
with the track.
Spike by spike,
some man
broke his back
to make this train river.
I sleep
through times of trees
- for a hundred years.
Redwood, aspen
clinging to the shaky mountains.
I wake up
to death.
Martinez.
Someone has vomited all over
this earth,
where the golden land
was cleared
and its people
hunted as sport.
Now too
into the Bay
poison

is leaking.

Men are hunting men.
The taco shops
carry on
because what else
can they do?
All the joy
is gone.
The corn
turns to sawdust
in the mouths
of the sad men
who still come here
because people gotta eat.

Further down in the
Mission
Calixto fights back
with linoleum
carved to red and black words
thick
and
reassuring.
We are right.
But I
hate it
that we are some of us
dying.

Different men and women
meet with me in the pit
of the cathedral.
“We know where the empresas
have hid the bodies,”
they say.
“We have been saying so
for thirty years,”
they cry,
looking at
their fingers
grown old.

In LA
an urgent couple
kneels quickly
at a shrine to Guadalupe
who knows why?
Dear God.
Dear God.
Dear God,
what shall we pray for?
Her tattoos quiver
scars now
pointing straight to prison.

The train station
casts its own shadow
and sucks me in.
Blue city at night
dawn at desert red and
tun, tun.
Promise and threat,
to be understood.
Not to die here,
water, wander,
water.
Could I suck
the tears of every mother?
Sew up the holes
in her body?
How long
would it take to name
everyone
who died here?
Not flesh but
bone
when the tun is gone.
Train quivers in the heat.
El Paso
Going from where to where?
This is already Mexico.

She picks me up
with dandelions in her arms
and they fly
from her to me.

Resista! Resiste! Resist!

How is it done?

the young ask.

This is how, we say,
like this, and this, and
this.

In the centre
of the sidewalk
shoot up.

Who the hell cares!

Be wild, abundant, absurd.

They go out the next day
to look for the dead.

We stay
and care for
the hurting ones instead.

2.

Todo es diferente
en la frontera
en la frontera
en la frontera.

Come, together,
change, heart,
desert, oasis.

El desierto nos da vida.

Life.

People, move.

Monarch, orange.

Promise, pollen.

Footsteps ring across the long, long, bridge
The Wall is nailed into the desert, on either
side,
disappear.
Wall. Women.
Pink cross.
Dead names.
Juarez.

Santa Maria, ilumina mi camino a casa.

“To face a hail of bullets,
a rainbow of peace.”

“Life is a rock
tough —
but hopes
for a turnaround.”

The women are dead —
but not all of them.

A. escaped
is hiding here.

Where she can eat and
someone for real loves her.

Up/Down over Death Valley
along the line
that won't be straight
gasps the river
Bravo.

Here for centuries now
a sliver not a roar
and the road that leads to no where
stops.

Young men,
the thin
one they call El Mono,
refuse to lie down.
They build a place for
poets
out of garbage.
They remember.
They teach remembering.
Boys and dogs
stray in
hoping this time
they won't
be kicked.
But loved
and inducted
into the Resistance.

Lucha and siesta
say the walls.
Malditos, malditos, malditos
those who get
fat
eating
the
poor.
Oak trees grow
on the white hills
protecting the
living and the dead.

3.

On we go now
over the bloody desert,
into the mountains
where a small man
dressed in white
waits and plots
to burn the church down.
He lives as if
The Founder
meant us to be this way
laced with hope.
The men,
once young,
who love each other
come.
“He lifts us up,
from the shock of our humiliation.
And so, we batten up our lives
and bring each other in.”

Her shock of hair
refuses to follow any rule.
She *will* live in beauty
though she catalogues
the list of women killed,
one by one.
Tum. Dead.

“Come,” she whistles.
Fran follows
the paid men too
armed but less dangerous than Fran.
“Come.”
She fills her jeep
with followers and friends
the men behind.
We tour the town.
We overthrow the bitter and sour.
We alight in site after site
where the man in white —
her best friend —
has laid his palms of peace.

Then out we bounce
to the dry, dry earth.

Ola raza del rancho!
He stamps through the dust,
each print behind
the rooted promise
one ancient bean
one kernel of corn from before
one eternal chili
rescued from oblivion.

She matches him.
Singeing hot bread from the very clay
she feeds the earth.

We go to the hills
in search of water.
We stop.
We hear.
We follow ‘til there she is slender, a
skeleton.

“Padre, Padre
tell me what
they have
done to River?
Why doesn’t she
sing
anymore?”

On the Mesa
we follow
until we
make land.
And there it is!
Water turned to blood
tossed across the green trim lawn.

No es sequia,
es saqueo.

This isn't drought, isn't drought.
This is looting.

4.

Tun.
The heart goes
anyway
into the cave of night
while possum creeps out and the
abaniquilla
waits
beneath the mesquite bush
for the first
sun of morning.

—
He rushes
in —
the old duende —
and picks us up
in his car
strung from wire.

“¡Buenas días gente de bien!”
He shouts
and doesn't stop
until the whole good book
is spoken
for.

“This River
— who never hurt anyone —
is almost dead.
This River, my actual brother,
has been kicked
beat
shot
shat upon
this river
annihilated by foreign men
who came, who come — thieves
to raze our Holy Creation.”

Nothing left.
Nothing breathing
just the brown foam
that forms from her dying mouth.

The otters gone.
The zanate gone.
The fish gone.
The fireflies gone.

Yet this duende, this tutifrutí
plants tobacco and fruit trees
and holds forth from
his mischief chair
inciting others to life,
to plant
to green.
“These little trees
all the while
were listening
were holding
us with their
scent,
their colour,
their texture to be read.

Despite everything
this faithful ugly river
makes noise
along the rocks.”

Elda
Jonathan
Augustín
Fausto
José Luis
Cynthia
Diego

Knife. Strike.

José Mauricio
Cesar de Jesús
Emanuel y Abraham, brothers
Ricardo Javier
Ruby
Fatima

Calvario.

Juan Francisco
David Ernesto
Luz María
Jaime César
Daniel
Miguel Ángel
Jorge Adain
Jaqueline
Araceli
Eliseo
Ignacio
Cristina
Ramón
Fermín
Mara Angélica
Lorena
Juan Manuel
Juan Pablo
Antonio
Henry
Wilberth
Osvaldo
Alma de Jesús

Hagan esto en memorial mio.

In memory of me.

Me.

Newborn breath, on mother's breast
turned to

Dust. Shovel. Bones.

before all these the drum is silenced

Meanwhile,
in some other weird world,
still this world,
they have reinvented
the dire wolf.

Running free,
in a pit.

Made to dance
on a sparkled drum.

A wily plan
to rake in some dough
with
no forest, nest, cave, stream, God,
in sight.

Just men,
and a dirty glass dish.

The poet who tells us this,
drives us to the night bus
which stamps and steams
like a dragon
and charges off
from the city
to the city again.

5.

Water high and
water low
we roll
into the city, city, city,
the great city
the grand city.
Built on water.
Made of water.
And now what?

Cuauhtémoc
could not hold
his feathered stand
past the pestilence
of the stinking men.
But in the secret coil
stashed in blood
he waited
and springs
time
in time.

We gather in the house of the wise
who see the shape
and stars of things.
In this hall the Red Bishop stood
and the White Bishop
and then me.
The hated and the hunted
will take a day of rest.

My compadre even,
with his wife, children, newborn daughter
chased by the war
the camps.
They slept on these streets
when the ground hit the ground
and brought everything down.
Then they came here.
The nuns gave him —
a marimba!
which he took a thousand miles away
wrapped in towels, like a refugee
child.

She lays the world out
in straight lines
and I see
who we are
and where we are going.
To the wrenching back
time and again.

Down the way
lives an old fox.
Having outsmarted all the rest
he lives in a den near the coyotes
if not in peace
than in satisfaction.
He's not done yet.

6.

Doña Lidia stirs the fire
spins the water.

Doña Lidia
makes the universe,
grinds the corn,
forms the dough,
flattens the disk.

Doña Lidia starts the fire
toasts and grinds
the bitter burnt seeds of cacao
she adds the invaders' panela.

We drink.

Doña Lidia takes the
tomate,
chile,
chapulín,
chile,
tlayuda,
frijol.

Corn,
blue and white,
yellow and black.

Cheese.

All these feast:
the hungry

the wise
the three times grateful.

The trolls meanwhile
sit under the bridge over nothing
planning who to kill next —
man
or woman
in the valley
or in the forest,
in the mangrove
or on the highway.

They suck the water up,
tie false bells on their toes
to make music.

They make the children
jump and dance
for rotten apples.

But look!
Here comes Doña Josepha Sánchez and with
her many many more.

The women who sing back the water.
The ghost of Toledo

holding steady the hand
of today's linoleum carver,
building a wall of intent.

The trolls evaporate
having no stomach
for a battle they can't rig.

Look, says Saul,
we who have shared this air
we are a part of one another.
You stay with me.
I go with you.

I go
with them all.

7.

Pulled home.
Here smells right.
Tongue folds softly.

On the bus
in the street
they don't know
I have loved this earth
to death
black
brown
red.

Buried here
bodies deep
mountains ground
los tres ombligos
of my three sons.

Like nothing
I rest in the house
of the red-haired one
and the black haired one
until they send me
across the lake.

There, I run through rain
to sit at the table
of satisfaction
of friendship
of lucha incansable.

Out of Tolimán
comes a Juracán
— how dare you —
500 years old,
time marked in lines
down his slope.

If you didn't know
you might think
he's laughing
and he might be
because
that's one way to win.

Tonatiuh grins
poking at the lava.
"Hey, I could sell this stuff!"
Not knowing
there's one thing
more dangerous than Juracán
— his daughter.

We sit in the room
packed with pine
tying our belts
together
against the storm
when in walk
the true
sons and daughters
of The Lake.
“Our Grandmother,”
they start.
We all listen.
“Will no longer be abused.”

Tonatiuh
would not think
this possible
that down the count of time
— beyond his comprehension —
these men and and these women
would stand here
their birds woven into one.

8.

There’s an old nun
and an even older priest
who took it seriously
when He said,
“Go into the world.”
They came
and never left
and never left off loving
even though there were so many dead
among those they loved.

She takes the wheel
and around and down
we go
through the corn
reaching to every corner
as it always has.
We skim the city and

up and out again
to her little parish house
on an old peach farm.
I rest
while doña Toña
comes and goes
selling cheese.
“I sleep here now,” she says,
“So that Sister won’t be alone
now that Yolanda is gone.”

They call, they call
across the hall,
is any body listening?
We are we shout
until they’re out.
We run through the streets
announcing our liberation
and demanding theirs.

Vamos patria a caminar,
yo te acompaño.

9.

Let’s go.
By night bus we go North to
the very heat of jungle
where they buried Maria
under a ceiba tree
so she could be with her muchachos
forever.

Her tear
that said yes
when all was lost.
They were inconsolable then
those tough men.
Only the women could go on and on
like Juana
lost in the trees
for 30 days
with two little ones
and the army
on her scent.

The women in the end with aguante to
bear it all
the infidelities
ravenous betrayals
still to carry the wood
to find a way
to make a fire
to cook the corn.

We go
— with a good laugh —
to Coronel Arbenz'
Beer & Pizza place.
These young men
who came back
from Sacramento
where they weren't wanted.
That odious hatred.

Here — paradise!
Building
the un-imagin/able
in their LA Dodgers hats.

Two things
hold the whole horizon up:
The Red Museum
which layers the frail strings
of a thousand stories.
Plus His Paintings
that make you
sit down.
The Morning They Left For the Capital.
One look
one raised hand
measures the quantity
of our unmitigatable grief.
Then there's the bosque
and don Pavel
who yells because explosives
blew his ear drums out
a thousand years ago.
No matter.
He knows it all.
Each leaf.

Each twig.
Where the water hides
and how to get it.
Where the black
ceriguates circle in the high leaves.
He takes us to a board swing
wide and far in a broad ceiba.
First he
then she
then me
we all come long
and sail out again
everything
having been restored.

10.

"Rose and gold is the riverbank
the riverbank rose and gold"
left alone.
The river lifts the soil
and brings it — free —
to the sea,
where it can sink and start again.
He, Our Father, stands over
the whole country
in its agony promising
—if not glory —
then at least
pan para los pobres.
He cannot be willed
to be silent.
Not then.
Not now
in the hour of our death
or our detainment.

That other one
who thinks he's
born of royal blood
has already forgotten
— if he ever knew —
the joy in surrender.

In dresses
that do not match
my friends
make firm
their feet
and dance.

They know this world is beautiful
and that poetry, like bread, is for
everyone.

11.

There is a wall of women
standing in the way
in the mountains
of the Sierra Madre.

Touch a soft girl
or a fragile boy
in the way of horror
and they *will* take you down.

Berta's sisters
lost their fear
a long time ago
or at least they hold that fear
together.

We resist
by occupying
the public space
they say
and do.

Purple flowers fill
the car
when we break
through the jam
and make it to the house
where all fell down
in grief.

We can't fix this
neither they,
nor I
nor the dog.

But we sit here
in one room

empty and full
and that lasts
for awhile
more than we can know.

Coming back down the mountain
we find a tiny wooden woman.
Who cares if she's a virgin!
She's there to join
the line.

12.

Gold. Copper.
Canal. Bananas.
Coca. Money.
Money. Money.
Dollars. Dollars. Dollars.
Stack them high.
Stack them wide.
Stack the Spanish coin.
Stack the Gringo buck.
Fire the gun.
Wipe the flag
through the mud.

Yellow fever
black bodies
blowing up
all the way
down
down
to silver town.

Who cares?
No one here
matters
not one red cent.

Except
here come the boys
who have eaten their fear.
They don't
care
if you rip the flag

down a thousand times.
They die
under bullets
but some don't
and then we get
a union out of it.
and a fight that will come back and back.

The mine circles down
and down
through the bones
throwing the banana workers and all
the garbage in behind them.
Until it fills and the people stand on top
and stop everything.

Then the men built from paper
take away
even our teeth,
put us to work building a hollow tower
so high it knocks the sky down.
Then another and another until they needle
the clouds.

Poking the rain,
and the wrath.

Below, the boys gather again.

13.

Green, green,
forest green,
jungle green,
city garden green,
mountain green,
leaf green,
river green.

La Gran Colombia
witnessing
down the
centuries.
Not idle dreams.
But distilled hope

made sword,
made fire,
centre of the standard
bearer
of men who, sí, knew
what it meant to be
noble
and stuck
with it
time and again.

“Mi cuerpo es bien chiquito
mi lengua no me da
querido Simon Bolivar
quien me dió la libertád.”

How many times
betrayal?

How much blood
caked on son's bodies,
spread on women's legs?
To what end?

Do these profess a program too?
Or fear, vengeance, hatred,
money, power, greed,
lust, despair,
stuff that makes sick the whole created
world?

Yet, in the smallest
corner
of Buenaventura
among the boats coloured in defiance
one woman,
then another,
says no.

They sew together
the sail
the shroud
the veil
then rip the others
down.

Now the women call
to one another
when the street grows dark.
Children play
dogs slink — ever hopeful.
Old men slap the table
with a perfect hand.

And the drum goes without stopping
long into the night, tun, tun.

One, two, three times
ripped to pieces
from the land
these ones
come, to the city,
then go again
to live in the
grass
while armies
circle round.
Here, one, two, three times
they will not lie down.
They will speak.
They will dress.
They will play.
They will sing.
They will plant.
They will heal.

I sit with them, in the dust,
untangling threads,
and laying them out again
in a decent row.
In all
the history of the world,
these things last.

14.

While up and through
the coast
up, up the river, follow,
the road
another man and another
and still another
knows the difference
between a law
made in stink
and one made
for hands that plant.
When the moon strikes high
they come and undo
the drills,
the death,
and their dog
—without doubt
their very best friend —
bites the man without mercy.
Quick in his palace
quiet

one man fights
too.
Disguised in an
old cloak
he is in fact
one of them
— and when he must
he shows it.
Zeal consumes him —
“You WILL NOT turn
our Father’s house into
a marketplace.”
With a tongue made
of cords
he throws them out
into the rain.
En cambio we take tea with him
in the wooden hall
with a carved roof
and set the game
right.
All that night and the next and
the one after that
the whole valley drinks
from the mountain.

15.

Young women
and men
hands shake
stand straight
learn to speak
learn to love the earth.
Speaking loud.
on their way.
Sister
Sister
Gutter
Sister
Byway
Sister
Settlement
Sister
fighter for all the rest.
Sister water water water.
Look, how pleasant it is,
when the water runs down her hands?
When the water waters the banana trees.
When the water washes a baby,

and then that baby laughs.
We as witnesses to it all.

From north to south
the city rises
in harsh layers
high, high above
where the cleansing vulture
glides over the putrid world,
the dead
the heaps of wasted rot
above ravaged rivers
and the bones of nothing.

Here a small woman
came
who was not afraid
to collect the dead
on her doostep.
In she walked
and in she stayed
year after year
living as if the children
were already beautiful.

And they were
just like that
picking up the
pen the
brush the
guitar.
Playing the world
something other
than brown and grey.

16.

Even higher now,
beyond breathing,
mist hits rock,
soft leaf sweet talks the water from
the air.

Snake become woman.
Woman becomes snake.
Snake becomes rock.
Rock becomes water.

She slips down,
holy, guarded,
making a fragile pact
which we

have always broken.

Indignation gathers,
water pools,
we fight the mountain,
the mountain pulls us up.

At last at the holy place the
lake
made of water from the mist.

First, we hang our heads
and pray.

With sorrow, with shame, with promise and
again,

the names of the ones
who did this all will rot,
like their bones,
and be removed from between our
teeth
where they still make us bleed.

17.

Three sisters
work
and want
the world
to realize what
it's done.

To see
that healing,
can be teased back to life.
That war can be bound.
That everyone is welcome at the table
to
taste and

see the
firefly lights
the way
to bed
calling the
other ones
from the poisoned river
to hang on.
They're coming.

Mandarins and oranges,
lemons and bitters
throw every seed they have

into the earth which brings up
such reward that
clapping hands cannot hold.

Cacao,
toasted, ground and spun
into water, hot.
Served. Nothing remains
but to put your head down,
and thank God.

Here.
Water. Safe.
Bird. Safe.
Forest in flower.
Dog laughs.
We do too.

18.

Querida Amazonia,
what could ever be said
or sung,
woven
or carved,
made
or unmade
by human hands
to tell
of your glory?
Could you be
mapped
marked
caged or
mined
turned into a tourist park
a coca plantation,
burned,
cuckolded?

ALL
the rivers come here.
Black.
Brown.
The milky way.
The sky rivers down.
Every tributary.
Every word.
Every vein.
Every tear.
Salty.

Sweet.
All water everywhere.

Even the stolen water
the dirty water
the mercury
cyanide
rare earth
petroleum
fucking gold for our finger rings.
All the lies all the lies all the lies.
Lie in this river.

Talk Talk Talk
curdles the milk in
their lost mother's breast.

Life or Death.
These I lay before you.
Choose life
at the meeting of the hopeful,
that you and your children may live.

Listen.

All our
consuming
shitting
killing
ends here.

Listen.
Quiet now,
here
like everywhere
speaking
singing
declaring
standing by those
who have the right to say.
Listen.

19.

Early in the morning
after sweet coffee and bread
we go out in his boat
to the river.
First up to his father's holy land,
Deus Provera.

The grass is high,
the water is down,
the fruit trees have thrown
their glory to the ground.
Genipapo. We fill our arms.
Then we follow the path
past the anti-iguana nets
to the watermelon field.
A neighbour has stolen one or two.
Soft prints in the grass reveal.
Nevermind, he says.
Deus Provera.
Parrots have left us one yellow mango
and left quite a mess on the ground.
They laugh as they flee their
guilty tree.
We laugh too.
He takes the one mango for his daughter.
The platanos too are ready.

When our hull is full
of fruit
we head back down
to where the water stands
still for a while.
Once.
Twice.
Three times he casts the net.
Then again,
the fourth time,
he pulls up full of silver.
My hands with his
untangle the bounty.
Pacu.
The river is generous.
The silver scales
stay on my hands
and feet for days.
Glitter for the remembering:
Life was asked for, and given,
with the knowing
that the river will always say more.
Tun.