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## There Are Moments That Hang Suspended

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THERE ARE MOMENTS THAT HANG SUSPENDED

By

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Bachelors of Arts in English

Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy

University of Rhode Island

2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Department of English

College of Liberal Arts

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## THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

We recommend the thesis prepared under our supervision by

Mark Barnett Lennon

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There Are Moments that Hang Suspended

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**May 2013**

## ABSTRACT

There Are Moments That Hang Suspended

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This project is the culmination of ten years of work in poetry. It was begun in imitation of those who impressed, not only with their fine words and dexterity with language, but also with their clear conviction in their subject material. Reflected in the works of Allen Ginsberg, Walt Whitman, and Adrienne Rich, among others, was evidence of a life lived, in Thoreau's term, deliberately. The writing of poetry seemed to be not simply a means of expression, but a goad to live a life worth examining, and to keep doing so; a progress report for a radical mind.

Politics and poetry have always been connected, though at times the connection is difficult to locate. Overtly political poems often flop rather than booming; didactic, sentimental, tinny. If the connection between them is not found solely in the "political" poem, maybe it can be found in the conditions of the poem's creation. Life is so often ineffable, betraying words and the minds that would use them. To write a poem, one must first be connected to life, using that connection to enliven inert language. The political journey of poetry is the management of that relationship, and the deliberate definition of its forms and avenues. The first and best tool in this process is attention.

This includes attention to oneself, to the myriad entities, relationships, institutions and literatures surrounding the writer, and finally to the poem itself. If a poem is to stand as a piece of art, it is measured by its intentionality, by the evidence of its purposefulness. Though the situation that occasions a poem must be considered as given, the poem, as response, is in effect a series of choices. These choices are the essence of the poem itself, and they are moral choices. Which word to use, how to break a line, how to represent one's perspective on the world, are choices which directly entangle the poet with their surroundings, with their language and literature, and with their reader.

This sense of the primacy of a living relationship, of a poetry that knows it is in the world and cannot forget that fact, is perhaps the first choice. Then, in the words of Adrienne Rich, I hope you find here: “not a map of choices but a map of variations/on the one great choice.”

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	v
1. Homesongs.....	1
<i>Haiku</i> .....	2
<i>Schoolhouse Pond</i> .....	3
<i>Empty Spaces</i> .....	5
<i>Groton Harbor, 6:27 AM</i> .....	6
<i>It'll Be OK</i> .....	7
<i>Walden Pond</i> .....	8
<i>Terminus</i> .....	9
<i>At Work</i> .....	10
<i>After Work</i> .....	11
<i>Outside</i> .....	12
<i>Jesse</i> .....	13
<i>Birds in the Pine</i> .....	15
<i>Giverny to Bellagio, by way of Pasquissett</i> .....	16
2. Communiqués.....	17
<i>Immediate Generation Before a Current</i> .....	18
<i>Without Alternative</i> .....	19
<i>Mind/Body/Work</i> .....	20
<i>Love Poem</i> .....	21

<i>Beer Goggles/Rapture</i> .....	22
<i>Sophistication</i> .....	23
<i>Montreal</i> .....	24
<i>Trait and Divide</i> .....	25
3. Vi(t)a.....	30
<i>The Current Unfolds</i> .....	31
<i>There Are Moments That Hang Suspended</i> .....	33
<i>Big Toe</i> .....	34
<i>From Spring and All</i> .....	35
<i>Brother</i> .....	36
<i>Sandiego LSD</i> .....	37
<i>The Way</i> .....	38
<i>Music Not Yet Played</i> .....	39
<i>White Light</i> .....	40
<i>Under Hushing Waves of Rain</i> .....	41
<i>Life:</i> .....	42
<i>Glottal Swansong</i> .....	43
<i>Nicaragua Diaries</i> .....	44
<i>La Bala</i> translation.....	62
Curriculum Vitae.....	63



## 1. Homesongs

*Haiku*

Hung-over mornings  
like a hypnotized angel  
I make you breakfast.

I am speaking of:  
Sidelong glances. Sunglasses.  
Pretenses. Faux pas.

A pale yellow sun  
stabs silent through bare branches  
falling on dead leaves.

Arc sodium lights  
on dirty snow and asphalt.  
Warehouse parking lot.

Those green evenings  
swimming while the water's warm  
leaving under stars.

Silence has a kind  
of shifty sibilance as  
it breaks its own word.

Sweet red plastic treat;  
seven slits swim in spirals;  
sleek teeth divide thee.

*Schoolhouse Pond*

Ringed with  
    tiny blossoms  
that disintegrate  
    into suds  
when rubbed  
    between the hands,

I cling to Dad's  
shoulders, left one  
split by a wide scar  
    where they put in the screw  
    that held him together.

Moving powerfully  
through the water  
bearing me in his wake  
in total joy and belonging.

That summer  
    riding  
the bumpy dirt road  
we were stopped  
    by two  
Narragansett tribesmen  
who said we couldn't swim here  
    anymore.

My father was out  
dragging for a week  
    when I was woken  
in the night  
by a jostling arm and  
the familiar smell of  
    stale beer.

He fell into bed  
beside me and I fell  
asleep inside his  
shallow breathing.  
When I awoke again  
my mother was there  
with my neighbor,  
six-foot eight carpenter

(She later told me her  
feet never touched the  
ground running next door).  
Sleepy and scared,  
they turned  
the man I thought  
    was Dad  
out of the house.  
He was extremely apologetic;  
he had gotten too drunk  
and come into the wrong house.  
We never locked our doors.  
We still don't.

That trip my father fell  
through the deck down  
into the fish and ice  
    and darkness  
broke his back.  
When he came home my  
mother cried for days, no  
fish on the table and  
    I thought we'd  
    always be hungry.

*Empty Spaces*

Just as  
Christ broke the  
loaves and fish,  
feeding multitudes  
and creating plenty  
out of the spaces  
between not enough;  
so I conjure up  
dust motes from  
a bare floor,  
songs and poems  
from voices unheard,  
and bliss from  
those aching, empty spaces.

*Groton Harbor, 6:27 AM*

Steaming out under overcast skies,  
warehouses stare out in gleaming halogen.  
Grey bridges crisscross the clouds and harbor,  
next to a shipyard of orange treated lumber.  
Harbor water reflects, cold morning breeze  
rippling glass sheet to the horizon.  
White oil containers inhabit a concrete park,  
brothers to grey stacks, tips lost in their smoke.  
The last gout of white smoke meets darker  
clouds and disappears.  
The orange lights on the top floor  
go out with the third shift workers  
making nuclear submarines.  
New sun lights up purple maples  
and fishermen's houses  
where they've lived for generations.

*"It'll Be OK"*

Grandpa lies  
drugged and bloated with fluid  
his beard has grown in white down his neck &  
his face is fuller than I have seen it,  
even in pictures.  
His body looms huge under hospital sheets,  
his legs dangling off the end of the bed.  
Sleeping giant,  
more terrible, more beautiful, stronger,  
in between death and life.

More powerful in silence,  
respirator tube gives him implacable patience.  
His eyes meet mine;  
Seeing him, I ask myself:  
What will I do in my life?  
Will I lie in peace,  
Will I be afraid, when I am dying?

His hands have some strength,  
& I know he feels me there,  
but I do not know if he is glad to see me,  
or if he wants to be alone.  
Somehow I will him to live,  
but what is recovery to an octogenarian?  
Where did eight and a half decades go?

He squeezes me harder when grandma worries over him  
harder than when they prick him with needles.  
Morphine titan with eyes he can hardly open,  
what silence and shadow within,  
what torment without.

I know him better in one hour  
than I did in twenty five years,  
but all I can say to him is:  
"It'll be OK, grandpa,"  
and then it is time to leave.  
I will not see him again.

*Walden Pond*

Waiting for the spirit of Thoreau,  
for that wild recklessness  
to bestow us with its  
preternatural power and grace,  
my philosophy class fidgets  
in nervous conversation,  
titillated by the fall of a leaf,  
an errant chipmunk,  
harbingers all of this fateful ghost.  
Though we stir restlessly,  
not one of us can be  
described as unreceptive.  
We wait to know ourselves,  
hold all symbols at arms reach,  
spook at crayfish while shadows  
flit in the periphery.  
Scanning Walden's glass,  
I too am waiting for Thoreau's ghost.  
Envisioning him in  
the mottled frog-head of an ancient bass,  
buried 'neath forty fathoms of dark depth,  
fattened on cloned fingerlings,  
thick as your thigh and  
with strength enough to surge forth again  
and make a big wave.



*Terminus*

In a white van filled  
with treasures, whorled  
vegetation, water  
from two coasts,  
postcards, paintings,  
hanging peppers  
dry in shadowed sun,  
we drove to the end.

Flitting absent highway  
hotel-nights like beads  
strung between Vegas  
and Wakulla, forgotten  
in the terminus.  
Brooklyn leaves her tatters  
and Frisco fits,  
and so I am deserted  
among the cactus tips.

*At Work*

On a lazy afternoon  
before work  
the words are  
slabs of stone  
resting on  
June grass.

Later  
in the sweltering  
pizzeria kitchen,  
armed thoughts  
buzz & swarm  
with venomous intent  
in the instant before  
the hood fans  
devour them.

*After Work*

“How was your day?”

My day was  
profitable and

I no longer  
remember it.

After work I reek  
of grease and  
adventure deferred.

Today was a day.

*Outside*

Night teeming with insect sounds  
and damp heat affords no relief  
but a cold bottle and pages between  
my fingers. Time downshifts and  
the night somehow melds. I have  
the moment right now in my hands,  
now in my teeth, in my breath.  
I am holding this moment for you.

*Jesse*

the box reads

"#081423

Jesse Koran Cook, Remains 1 of 2"

A trumpet, a poem, a jug of wine,  
Dave and Eamon, the others in my arms:  
12 or so friends, lovers, a family  
now with slow, quiet words  
in the dome of our solemn intention  
together with  
the realization that all he is  
is now here in us

I return:

A park bench in Kingston where we first met  
when he came home from the psych ward at Butler  
I read him Howl in Butterfield dining hall

I was Dylan in his stories but he was Dylan too  
books and clothes crammed in  
tattered guitar case hope  
sleeping on my couch or riding  
to Brooklyn or Westport or Topeka  
where he thought he got AIDS  
from a transvestite on a Greyhound,  
later to find it was Lyme

He told me his mother died of an overdose  
his father was  
(no watch and no quarters, forgotten man  
at a bus stop, drunk dreaming drowned)  
by his own hand

what took Jesse  
to that stranger's house in New Hampshire

where  
brain blown to smithereens by  
years of hopelessness and Lyme  
the old man told police

Jesse'd held him all night at gunpoint, that  
the gun'd gone off when Jesse  
tried to give it up.  
I didn't believe it.

all those summers  
we swam in Narragansett Bay,  
sun glittering on his smile, now  
I have to get him in the water,  
to swim together one last time

strip down, open the box  
thick, clear plastic bag  
pound or two of gray-white ash  
pocket knife slits the bag  
wind blows puff into hand  
his hands  
    hair  
        breath  
        skin  
            sweat  
all of him deep,  
earthy smell of ash  
rinse with salt of sea  
breathe in his taste  
ash & water on fingers a paste glove  
withdraw a handful and cast him in the water  
dust draws the light  
ash murks water  
filled with his scent  
surrounded by his mist  
fling handful after handful  
upturn the bag  
sink down into him  
dip my head, rise,  
fling myself in the sea

a single note  
blasts from  
the trumpet:  
the water is cold  
thoughts are still  
and my own.

*The Birds in the Pine*

In the backyard  
paved in concrete  
and stones, the big pine,  
where the birds live,  
climbs the sky.  
I sit smoking, waiting  
for the moment, the lull  
in traffic in the busy morning.

Last week, I swept up  
the needles and pine cones,  
cigarette butts and empty packs  
and beer bottles,  
my roommates' desiccated  
jack-o-lanterns.

Now the yard is bare,  
ringed with office chairs and brick walls.  
I listen to the birds in the pine,  
waiting for a glimpse and wondering  
how they like the yard.

*Giverny to Bellagio, by way of Pasquisett*

Real and immediate diffusing light  
in purple daubed with muffled shadows.  
Dark water rusts a year's leaves, disappears  
my arms unfurl a surface.  
Ripples settle under branches,  
The reflections are velvet silver kisses.  
Dusk becomes a childhood,  
a world entire, intact  
revealed in glimpses.  
The water takes me, floats me  
in enigmatic memory  
until the colors draw away.



## 2. Communiqués

*Immediate Generation Before a Current*

Only way to poem is by going-  
making motion, words to will:  
in their slide they instruct,  
symmetry time's bandit.  
The regime is in fact  
defined at the frontier,  
ever-changing.

Life does not stop  
words do not move  
do not let us touch.  
As unconscious as  
one-must-follow-the-other,  
broken brake;  
A whirligig theater  
of its own inner  
workings, It goes  
because you go.

In poems I  
suffer the parting  
of words from ways  
make light of the trill, the thrum  
of being thrills  
glitter of glass speaks  
her own letters;  
I keep time with silence.

Inner being was never  
more a mirror than when  
we lay on the grass and  
spoke in slim green tongues.

*Without Alternative*

Ai! ai! we do worse! We are in a fix! And you're out, Death let you out let you out, Death had the Mercy, you're done with your century, done with God, done with the path thru it —Done with yourself at last—Pure—Back to the Babe dark before your Father, before us all—before the world—

Kaddish, Allen Ginsberg 1961

In language madness  
    is an error  
without alternative.

As soon as we  
    say it is said  
swept from  
    lips irrevocable  
letter superseding  
    a better world.

Life does not stop  
    words do not move  
do not let us touch.  
    She was sliding  
you see no matter  
    what doctors or  
son's love said.  
    We think in what  
is said what can be  
    said. Nothing can  
be said for Naomi  
    not anymore  
not really.

*Mind/Body/Work*

Articulate constellation speaks  
makes itself known mending  
light in the center of its fissure,  
emits what passes through  
generations untouched.

Embodied in our common medium  
in time and place our particulars  
mark us, determined values  
necessitate, tremor of body extends  
finds its limit in what can be named.

Timeless aspect in the body,  
breath, eye, the movement of blood,  
the memory of hands,  
words suture our selves  
to common human yearning.

*Love Poem*

Enter, she said  
Enter me and see  
my inside, I said.  
There is no inside  
not really, not one we  
can know, only another  
surface and an  
other. She does  
not trust men, does not  
trust me, by extension.  
I insist and we  
weave our lives together  
and worry the loose threads.  
She does not believe  
in hope, excitement, happiness.  
I do not believe  
in money, future, myself  
most times.  
We call this love  
and so our love is woven.

*Beer Goggles/Rapture*

Summer city  
drown in beer  
become brighter  
draw eyes  
to back-lit sky:  
Lose self-  
consciousness,  
become more aware  
of surroundings  
hollywood buildings  
city set-piece  
with spring's green  
gold in whiskey streetlights  
pale moon desires  
spring up unmitigated  
in frantic rising night.

*Sophistication*

It was necessary  
to afford the other  
with a certain limit  
of trustworthiness  
lest we really be  
talking about nothing  
at all!

Which is to say:  
we were arrogant and  
believed in nothing  
beyond our own noses.

*Montreal*

Eyes opened by glittering  
in the cool night  
on centuries-old stone  
and cultural neons.

Somehow venerable  
in this light I see  
a new country.



*Trait and Divide*

I

In writing we  
speak absence.  
We cannot refer;  
at most, we approve  
the word with  
comfortable reference  
reassuring.

Certainly the word  
living or dead has  
its own creative turn of mind  
even more oblivious than  
creative genius.  
We know, or think we know  
the enormous mass of writing  
that appeared the language  
method habit

we only conclude  
we are unconscious  
we are as inevitable as  
what passes in our minds  
when we feel our minds  
in their work.

One of the facts that  
might come to light is  
our tendency to insist  
upon the peculiar  
immediate  
something  
without which the dead  
assert their immortality  
most vigorously.

the only form consisted in  
immediate generation before  
blind adherence to its currents;  
repetition is  
a matter of place,

indispensable to anyone;  
it involves perception,  
only its presence  
compels a man to write  
with his bones  
with a feeling that the whole  
of literature within his existence  
composes simultaneous  
timeless acutely conscious  
place in time.

poet has his meaning alone.  
the dead cannot value him;  
for contrast, you must set him  
among the dead.  
he must cohere simultaneously  
all existing monuments  
form an ideal order  
of new (really new) art before  
existing order is complete  
new work arrives;  
for order to persist after  
the supervention of novelty  
the *whole* existing order must  
be altered; relations, proportions,  
values readjusted.  
Whoever approved this order  
must be preposterous.  
And the poet is aware of this.

Be aware that he must inevitably be judged,  
amputated, worse than dead,  
judged by the canons of dead.  
for new work to conform  
it would not be art.  
the new is more valuable  
because it is a test of value—  
infallible conformity appears  
hardly likely to find one.

To proceed to the poet:  
he can form himself on  
inadmissible experience.

The current does flow  
invariably but must be—  
a mind which learns in time  
to be his mind—  
a mind which changes,  
abandons nothing *en route*.  
This development  
is an awareness  
    awareness itself cannot show.

Some one said:  
“The dead are.” They are that which we know.

I am alive.  
doctrine (pedantry)  
deadens receptivity,  
sweat more essential than history.

surrender of the moment to progress is  
extinction of personality.

depersonalization is science  
a platinum chamber containing oxygen

## II

Honest and sensitive  
we attend to the poets;  
if we seek enjoyment of poetry  
and ask for a poem,  
we shall find out  
the relation of the  
poem to the living whole  
the relation necessarily at liberty  
to enter into new combinations.

The catalyst;  
the shred of experience is  
the man himself,  
more completely man  
who suffers and creates will  
digest and transmute the passions.

experience will enter presence  
catalyst effect of experience  
different from any art  
inhering in words or phrases  
the final result  
evident complexity  
an image, "came",  
arrived for it to add itself to  
numberless phrases  
until all particles can  
unite to form a new present.

the combination of sublimity and process  
approximates the fusion of the absolute nightingale.

the metaphysical soul  
a peculiar negligible man

a passage in darkness:

death

Shall be revenged

the silkworm does undo herself

to maintain the poor bewildering highways

between the lips

this passage (if it is taken)  
is evident: it destroys  
the dominant affinity to  
superficially new art

provoked by complexity  
eccentricity novelty  
it discovers the perverse  
unconscious where conscious ought to be  
Poetry is not an escape; it is not what it means.

### III

the frontier of poetry is  
a juster expression of life in its  
present moment of conscious living

### 3. Vi(t)a

*The Current Unfolds*

The sea does not care  
one drop for  
the human dramas  
of life and death.  
Relentless waves  
break themselves  
on the implacable shore  
of sanity, a scarred  
and mute beachhead.  
Everything I hold dear,  
anything I ever held,  
or tried, with my wretched,  
grasping mind,  
I watched the ocean devour  
with roaring mouths afroth.  
The rise, the crashing climax,  
the denouement of foam lapping-  
it is in this  
that we lose  
every tiny piece, every grain of sand.  
Sliding away unnoticed,  
after the crash and under the foam.  
Erosion suffers reason  
the enormity of life  
and slowly the foundations crumble.

I float back,  
drifting, as one will drift to sleep.  
Behind me, a trail of thoughts,  
A ships wake, a wave,  
A silver trail to the horizon  
dwindling until there is only one trail  
only a wave, a current.  
From that stream issues beautiful music  
and unearthly light,  
and for awhile, all is light and music.

We are strange questions,  
who answer ourselves in the asking,  
and the lights,  
which are all-enveloping

become distinct and temporal  
in my doubt.

The music becomes a rush  
and the current unfolds,  
rises up, great and terrible  
into a wall before me.

Borne up,  
carried into the heavens,  
and cast down like a thunderbolt  
onto the beach,  
I lay still, breathing.

Slowly, the small waves come  
and take away, grain by grain,  
the sands that hold me.

Someday, when all has been  
washed away and there is nothing  
left to take,  
the wave will never falter.

There will be no ground to break upon  
and no sand to be carried away,  
and it will curl and crest forevermore.



*There Are Moments That Hang Suspended*

There are moments  
that hang suspended.

Watch them slide, glistening,  
riding a green vein  
falling into flight.

Time's mirror broken  
the impact released

riding the first wave  
green across the glass.

*Big Toe*

Big toe makes balance,  
points where to go.  
Vector streaming to ancient lake,  
to eyeball, to dandelion.

Stubbed most often,  
blood streaked on linoleum  
stream of curses emanates.  
Nail falls away yet  
the wound closes  
magically--returned to  
coherence, to balance,  
to touch the springy earth.

Without big toe, I would  
be falling over: Swimming  
in circles, cycle strokes  
lopsided, one foot ginger,  
other missing the easy rhythm--  
No dancing, I stand to the side--  
Wallflowered by my clumsiness.  
If I curse you, big toe  
I curse the world.

*From Spring and All*

From a running stream  
the flies bzzzz and a frog  
heard plops somewhere  
behind me. Above  
mountains rise containing  
all the vast Vegas valley,  
a panoply of lives and money  
light and electric fortunes  
left behind thank God!

The city withers  
each home along  
cockroach alley. Still,  
friends I have in abundance:  
faces, voices, sweet clear  
and muddied minds  
forever singing broken  
peace and justice.

They are now my  
Imagination! So far  
home has not been home,  
the sea dried up  
and the two ducks in  
love have no pond between  
them. Oh sweet dreams  
Regina.

*Brother*

I thought you  
anchored in Rhode Island,  
but you've been to Europe,  
Austria and Iceland,  
and still we are stuck in America.  
Crisscrossing brothers  
we share beers and meals,  
win \$14.48 from the penny slots.  
We share the pain of silence  
more and more compartmentalized:  
you are brave and beautiful  
to me, Dean,  
we have yurts in Nicaragua  
to look forward to.

*San Diego LSD*

San Diego mid-afternoon pothead holiday

I hold the dose, my first, on wave-washed rocks.

A bearded hippie beats his drum

back through a drain-pipe

the beat rejoins

the earth

the sea

the tab on my tongue

poised, dissolving sinks the sun

behind dark glasses the beachgoers are all movie-stars

the fruit of the city blooms into night flowers of

streetlights and paranoid wanderings of junkies and policemen

always back to the sea, the explosion of wine and recklessness at the end of California.

*The Way*

language opens before us  
we are confronted

the goods of this world are  
not in proportion to the people  
each being the measure of all things

likewise great joys are  
rarely shared; they belong  
to a single blessed moment  
when we are alone simply  
overwhelmed by our  
common place

each must suffer in silence  
each must wring her hands alone

out of the gulfs between us  
and between time come  
trails of glistening verbs  
allowing us to explain  
who we are and how  
we came to be

*Music Not Yet Played*

Across from you in class, I watch you sitting,  
curling hair around a finger, chewing your pen  
as I am wont to take off an unruly nail,  
surreptitious yet unselfconscious, you meet my eye,  
a smile parts your lips, teeth sudden speak the skin  
that caught the bedside candle  
where we lay in broken splendor last night.  
We spoke of music and the melody cast itself  
against our gleaming bodies until we were still,  
waiting in the music not yet played.

*White Light*

My mind is on our breath,  
tracing unconsciously  
the muted line of your hip.  
Fingers follow the long  
smooth rise of skin  
to the tipping point.  
Your breath catches  
for three stuttered beats  
while I hold mine,  
and like an avalanche  
five fingers bury us  
in blinding white.



*Under Hushing Waves of Rain*

A soft breath  
carries the rain in  
wet hot dizzying  
patterns woven  
tensions gleaned from  
the atom of one drop  
tracing a contour  
an insistent sensation  
a finger a hand  
multitude bodies.

The trees slouch low  
shivering expectant  
the charge in the air  
hunched straining  
electrical release  
shattering smoking  
falling timber  
fires spring up  
rage a thousand lives  
fall gently into  
lush green graves  
under hushing waves  
of rain.

*Life:*

The control of a system.  
the formulation of value  
and the stimulus to action.

The awareness, of pleasure  
and of pain, but mostly of power,  
of will-to-do and the overcoming  
of self.

The center of control  
and the motion outward  
from the center.

A framing of boundaries,  
that there may be a beyond  
to attain to.

A perspective  
that seeks to master,  
to look down on, to infiltrate  
and undermine all obstacles.

A spiral of spiritual knowledge,  
an explosion of galaxies  
containing the memories  
of the whole within the trajectory  
of each.

A riddle that gnaws  
at its own heart.

A sadness.

The moment when the sun's rays  
pierce sleep heedless of  
dreams' urgencies.

*Glottal Swansong (Lull)*

In the ink-dark  
the swallow stirs.  
“Lull, your name is Lull”  
she murmurs.  
The valve of the throat  
closes the heart’s song.  
Against the stopper rises  
strains of muted melody.  
Lull is the swallow's song,  
soft as his name, he sings her song for no one:  
“She is the one  
who in the moon holds herself  
Dreaming of soft summer skies.  
And he is the loon,  
who laughs at the moon,  
and reflects the world in his eyes.”

*Nicaragua Diaries*

1

I arrive in dark, wait as customs agent frowns over my battered passport, scowls silently over to me: “No es bueno.” I agree, characteristically laconic, mangled, clumsy, my tongue too big in my mouth. I smile, to infect him with my cheer or at least my lack of concern. He checks me through, knowing that I am not worth his disdain or even official censure. I step past to the baggage claim, eyes wide devouring everything, barely registering that I am slowly being stripped away.

\$20 for a fifteen-minute taxi ride through the slum city of Managua, then \$11 for a night at the Backpackers’. It’s nine o’clock and everything is closed already so I settle on a gas station hot-dog and a can of cold Toña, talk to the students gathered in the hostel courtyard where we talk politics and philosophy until I must sleep.

2

Awake early, change eighty dollars into two thousand cordobas like magic and take a fifty cord taxi ride twenty minutes across town to the bus depot, making a mental note to at least learn to haggle in spanish before too long. The bus to Chinendega is twenty cordoba, less than a dollar, and leaves as soon as it is full.

I sit squashed between a man and a woman who I am to find out has had eight children, which does not deter her from hitting on me for two straight hours in Spanish. Although she knows that I understand nothing she is saying she is very insistent that I answer her ridiculous demands, and soon I am reduced to the repeated refrain: “Yo tengo

novia! Yo tengo novia!” as she gropes and pinches me mercilessly. The man on my left finds no end of amusement in my predicament. I lean into them and dissolve into the strange language and laughter. I will not begin dreaming in Spanish for two more weeks.

In Chinendega I exit the bus post haste, fall upon a cigarette vendor (30 cord a pack!) and inhale two in minutes. A taxi driver asks me where I need to go in English but I wave him off until the first cigarette is gone, pausing between to answer “Jiquilillo”. He says: twenty five dollars and I know it’s far but I also know that the bus is only a dollar or 24 cordobas and right now it’s impossible to know what money is worth in this country so I wave him off again, saying in English that I need to think about it.

I spot the old woman departing and ponder the difference between a three hour bus ride and an hour in the passenger’s seat with the window down, and when the driver comes back speaking “twenty” I hoist my backpack and we are off. He says his name is Francisco, asks if I am hungry and we stop first at his house where his wife Maria cooks us huevos y arroz y frijoles con tortillas and he asks me to take their picture so that I will remember them. He kisses her when we leave and I don’t even know how we got to talking about politics but he shows me the scar in his neck and another in his side from bullets shot by the contras who killed his brother and his father and his wife’s entire family. I forget even “lo siento” so I just say “I’m sorry” and I am; sorry for living in a country so fucked up that we could invent a Reagan and a George Bush among other unfortunate species of intervening bigot, but that doesn’t even begin to speak to it so I leave it at “I’m sorry” and he looks at me and gravely says “Thank you” and I know that we both meant it. We drive in silence for awhile and soon we reach the dirt road that

goes to Jiquilillo. He starts snarling to the road and I have a sneaking suspicion that my taxi ride is about to get a little more expensive.

Mil cordoba lighter (just over \$40 U.S. dollars for an hour ride) I walk up to Rancho Esperanza and meet my bosses, Nate and Shana. When I tell them how much I paid for the ride they shake their heads, but they didn't see his scars.

Nate is from Maine. He came to Jiquilillo after two storm seasons devastated the town. After non-profit money ran out, he created Rancho Esperanza in order to continue his development work. He is an avid surfer, energetic, shuns shirts. Shana did graduate studies in international development in New York. She is a yogi, an impressive and powerful woman. Shana met Nate here and decided to become his partner. Together they have built a small surf hostel priced to backpackers, hiring many local people. Also working here is Ben, from San Diego. He is working as a manager for nine months while he waits to hear the results of his graduate school applications. Another avid surfer, muscular, with soulful eyes.

I am to volunteer as an English teacher. They tell me I can start work on Friday and it is only Tuesday night so I wander to the beach and take my first taste of the Pacific. I crack a Toña and meld into the first of many Pacific sunsets, nights spent reading in hammocks, swatting away the scarab beetles. After many hours I climb up to bed, Regina's memory with me. I can feel her arms, her legs tangled in mine, her soft neck hairs, her scent, her need. She is waiting for me, in Vegas, Buffalo, in Jiquilillo or in the realm of sleep, keeping time with my dispersal, keeping what is meant to keep.

I set up to climb Cosiguina, a towering volcano visible from the beach. The truck comes at 4AM and I clamber in the back with the guide, Guillermo while an American couple and a German schoolteacher sit in the cab. I reach the limits of my Spanish with Guillermo in about a minute and a half and sit back, shivering in silence over the bumpy road, my discomfort repaid with a brilliant sunrise over fields of sesame. We reach Potosi and down a coffee, then take the truck to the end of the road, dismount and begin a three hour hike.

The ground is crushed pumice, sliding from beneath my feet as Guillermo, five feet tall, scampers lacksidatically, pausing to call out birds based only on the sound of their wings flapping. I never see any but the living presence of the volcano suffuses breath, ear, mind. Thwack, goes the machete, idly clearing brush as the gringos slow him up. Guillermo has lived on the side of Cosiguina all his life. He is as much a part of it as the parrots or the pumice, or the vines lined with giant thorns filled with poisonous termites, who scurry out to numb my arm with beautiful clarity and somnolence beneath the blue.

We pass a bunker where the guerrillas held off Somoza's National Guard in '79, now filled with garbage and excrement, tourists always shit on what they cannot understand. Then the jungle opens out, the trail rises up and up, and suddenly without warning we are at the summit, the lip of the crater. Down below, under a two-hundred foot sheer drop, an emerald lake steams beneath the sun, a mile across. As far as Guillermo knows, no one has ever made it down but he will try before he dies. All

around, the blue stretches to greyed out outlines of the far shores of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras. The rice and sesame fields look like a miniature checkerboard with countless squares, a diminishing Escher tessellation. The blue of the sky, the sea, and the shore, the other distant Volcanos blend gently in the mind, the fine opium smoke of my dreams.

4

In Jiquilillo, the fishermen leave with the sun, work the night and return at first light boats laden with pargo rojo corbina, atun. They fish with bombas here, quarter-sticks of dynamite to kill the chum, inciting a frenzy that is irresistible to the slow hand. I know this life, imperfectly except in my father's absence, the mysteries he brought home in plastic totes, the smell of slime hardened on fiberglass in the sun, all the death burned out of it, yet damp, damp, damp. There is an abundance of handless arms, old men with rum-dulled eyes, nocturnal children.

I remain diurnal, rising early to surf or just for coffee, eager to pile into a new book or an old one, hammocks in the sun or shade. I learn to order huevos entiros, soaking the gallo pinto with the yolks, coffee driving my eyes through page after page. Nate and Shana explain my duties as a volunteer. I am to teach two one-hour classes per weekday and help with the dinner dishes. In return I receive a twenty percent discount on food and lodging. Then they leave for Esteli, leaving Ben in charge of the rancho. I resolve to help him as long as it doesn't interfere with my prior resolution to read at least three hundred pages per day.



Danielle, my old friend, and her husband Gary are living in Aserradores, 25 kilometers down the coast. There, the boom wavs calls pro surfers from all over the world; one of the fastest tubes and best beach breaks in any country. Despite the proximity, myself and Josh, a fellow volunteer from Britain, find ourselves on another bus to Chinendega. We have an hour or so in the market, eat fresh grilled meat and watch the vendors pile through the busses. Children with buckets of cola, old women with bags of jicama, a middle-aged man with knives for a dollar. The bus pulls away as the vendors filter out the open back door, and we stop every few minutes for a new flood of wares and hopes, blessings and multifarious sugar.

The second bus takes us another three hours, slowly emptying until it is quiet enough to read. We figure we must be in Aserradores but the only landmark we know is Rancho Pedro and we miss it the first time through. As the bus turns around at the end of the line we are greeted by thousands of shrimp laid out on the side of the road in great tarps. Soon the villagers will pack them in ice and send them to Miami and Kyoto, Lisbon and L.A. The bus completes its stop and the driver dons a hairy demon mask, driving us into exhausted hysterics. The mask transcends all languages riding to hell or paradise.

Soon we are at Pedro's, smoking cigarettes and waiting for his son, who Pedro, a red-haired man who speaks some English, says will take us to Danielle. We leave with him, walking down a nearby dirt road as dogs bark in the trees beyond. Through the jungle trees I spy a small plaster hut painted rose. We knock and Danielle and Gary

come, soul-peace radiating from sun-bleach, tan, and strong water-muscles. They are a pair.

She still has her dog Raven, sweet old black lab just as keen for love. We rest, watch the surf videos they're making, and I finish *The Manchurian Candidate*, happy for the freedom to read what I won't have time for in Grad School.

6

At morning we down coffee, oatmeal, trek through the trees to the beach, expanse of sun and sand, waves rolling in great lines against the shore, endless roar rising as we approach, the fall of each wave distinct at last as it reaches its end in the white sand.

Surfers dot the water, eager patient men and women of all countries drop in and feel the power built in the center of Pacific winds. A roller mounts above, deceptive racing creep of time, rising overhead in a geometric curve, describing mass, gravity, force, and surface tension, the last collapsing and curling along the earth's line as surfers dance to outrace that collapse, before the exhausted crush of foam. I climb in, teeter on the edge of a wave or two, decide to keep my life and return the board to the shore. I watch the waves and the surfers for hours, reading and picking up sand fleas.

Pedro drives us back to Jiquilillo, it takes forty minutes and he only charges us for gas. Nate and Shana have returned, and the rancho is readying for Christmas. There are new travelers, from the Czech Republic and Illinois. And my hammock is waiting, and a library of books.

Two days before Christmas I roll from my bunk, ready for coffee. The cook, Jaqui, and her daughter Jeffanie, are off with their family. Ben is making breakfast. The meals here are more expensive than they would be in a city, with prices posted in dollars. Three seventy-five for eggs, gallo pinto, and toast would buy a big dinner at a food stand. They charge more here in order to pay their workers and because food supplies are difficult to obtain.

Because of the coming holiday there is no class today, and I still have no idea what I'm going to do, so I start planning and going through the teaching materials they have here. There are a few flashcard sets, an English textbook for Spanish speakers, and a host of Spanish textbooks for English speakers. I start translating what I want to say to the students, writing out and translating whole lessons. My background in French and Latin is helpful, but my pronunciation is terrible and there are certain things I don't understand. I find out what "me gusta" means and why it seems to lack the usual conjugation and pronoun pairing. The thought of listening for reflexive verbs when I can barely pick up a couple words from any given sentence makes me realize how far I have to go. I had no illusions that Spanish would be easy, but I did think I would be able to teach English without much Spanish. I am starting to see how difficult it will really be. And classes start in two days. I pour myself into my books all day, spending more time looking up Spanish words than actually planning a lesson. I haven't taken a language course in over ten years, and I have no idea how to teach English systematically. One of my students is Imara, about twenty-three, a student in nearby Leon, and the receptionist

at Rancho Esperanza. Because I have been here for a week now, I have had some opportunity to speak with her. Shana tells me that she speaks English pretty well, but I can tell that she is shy, and stubborn. When I see her around the rancho, she insists that I speak in Spanish only, correcting my speech and pronunciation without compunction. For her, I don't even plan a lesson. I want to find out what she knows first.

I take a break from my work after lunch to walk the beach, hoping to try out some of the Spanish I have been learning. Instead, the beach is mostly bare, with only a few scattered children, the youngest wearing makeshift diapers. I watch them play, wave and smile when they do. I watch them compete and fight, contend with the waves. Showing off. I realize that this is what I cannot do in this place, without language. I can only abandon the contention of life, and accept.

I buy some oranges, and some local pastries from a passing Moskito woman, Coraline. She is friendly and speaks a little English, but when that is exhausted she continues on in Spanish and Moskito criol. We walk and talk for a bit, Coraline doing most of the talking. It is like playing "Battleship". She asks a question. I say "Que?". She rephrases. I wrack my brain, but everything I have learned today swirls in my head, moving too fast to be picked out and put to use. Suddenly, she turns and bids me goodbye: "Voy a vender, a trabajo. Adios."

Her face is a wonderful mask: a habitual stoicism mixed with pride controls her features. Beneath, a smile dances just below the surface, at turns superior and mischevious. Her eyes though, conceal deeper secrets. There is sadness here, and a need

of companionship. “Adios amiga. Gracias por tu paciens y tu conversacion.” I don’t know if I said it correctly, but a real smile breaks her facade as we part.

I get back to the rancho just before dinner, and I have forgotten to put my name on the list. You have to order by four, or they don’t make enough. I realize my mistake and head back off to find a restaurant. There is a good one up the beach a bit, with a sunset view and a friendly manager named Paolo, from Rome. I walk up and the outdoor dining area is dark and empty. I poke my head in the kitchen. “Hay cena?”

An older woman answers. “No. Trabajo por mañana.” Christmas eve is the big family dinner in Nicaragua. Probably most other restaurants would be closed as well. I look around a bit more, hoping Paolo can help.

I find him in the unfinished hotel, talking with a short, broad local man wearing glasses. “Hey Paolo, where can a guy get a meal around here?”

He turns, smiles and says, “Ho, Mark, lo siento my friend. Everybody is working for the big holiday dinner.”

I explain to him the situation at the rancho and my fear that his is not the only restaurant that is closed. At this point, Paolo’s friend interrupts, his English better than Paolo’s: “If you need food, come eat with my family. We have a lot of food so it’s no problem.” Paolo introduces us and I am elated to meet Don Hector, especially given the circumstances. He says he is a fisherman from El Salvador, and that he lived in New York City and Toronto, where he learned English. He lives in Chinendega, capital city of the province where Jiquilillo is located. We walk to his work area to meet his wife, Hazel, and his son, Hector Junior. All three speak English, but Hector keeps pushing me

to use Spanish. Hector Junior is sixteen, intelligent and animated, and wants to know everything about the United States. He has an American girlfriend who he met online, and agrees to come and help me run my English classes. Hazel is from Chinendega and learned English in school. She speaks quietly but clearly, looking right in your eyes.

Hector says that when he was his son's age he was a guerrilla in El Salvador. His mother told him that he had to leave or the government would come and disappear him. He went to New York with nothing and became addicted to heroin, trying to escape the things he saw in the war. When he got clean he went to Toronto and worked construction until he had enough money to go home. He made his way to Nicaragua and bought a boat. Now he runs several boats, called lanchas, here in Jiquilillo. He also supplies ice to many boats here and takes the fish to market, getting higher prices in Chinendega from distributors who market to Europe, Asia, and the United States.

Don Hector invites me to breakfast after the holiday and wishes me feliz Navidad, and Hector Junior drives me home in a big Toyota pickup, peppering me with questions about the States. I am too late to help with the dishes, but everyone is playing UNO and the Toña and rum are flowing. I settle in to a seat and join the next game.

8

Christmas Eve passes quietly and I finish a science fiction novel in a day. An old volunteer at the rancho, Pete, from Australia showed up today. He is quick witted, dry, and laughs easily. We talk for awhile and watch the sunset as a group before dinner. We have paella and red snapper with salad. Then Nate and Shana serve shots of fresh ginger and hibiscus infused rum. Down the beach, the bombas explode continuously. Friends of

the rancho drop in throughout the night and it is late before everyone drops off. I hold my buzz steady, looking forward to an hour or two of reading at midnight.

9

I wake up on Christmas to find that there is a new arrival at the hostel: a puppy named Yogi. Classes start tomorrow, so I hit the books hard, being careful not to miss dinner tonight.

The next afternoon, Imara meets me by the beachhouse after lunch. We talk for an hour, with me trying to figure out what she knows and her trying to get me to speak Spanish. After making little progress, it is time for my next class. I have three students in this class: Francisco, who works at the rancho doing odd jobs and speaks with a stutter; Jose, a bright-faced local surfer, 16; and Carlos, another local surfista, 17. None of them speak any English. We sit around for five minutes, trying to talk to each other, until Hector Junior shows up in his father's truck. He translates between myself and my students, giving me miniature Spanish lessons all the while. We pass the end of class in engaged and sometimes hilarious conversation, and continue on for another half hour.

10

For the next few days my routine holds: wake up for a morning surf or swim, eat breakfast, three hours of coffee and reading, lesson planning, class, surf, sunset, dinner, beer and more reading. I make a breakthrough with Imara when she tells me that she likes Sherlock Holmes. There is a collection of Doyle's stories in the rancho library and we read it together on Friday. My other class is making serious progress, learning many new words every day. One of the other guests at the hostel is from Vermont. She is

working at a hostel in Leon and invites me to visit. I decide to go to over the weekend, taking an early bus to Chinendega, but when I finish my last class and walk back to the main cabaña, my taxi driver Francisco is there, having just dropped off a passenger. I tell him to wait for me and buy him a soda. I gather my belongings and put the rest of my gear in Ben's cabaña.

We pull into Leon at dusk, and I have no idea where Hattie's hostel is, not do I remember the name. I tell Francisco to stop at a hotel, the Hotel Austria. I step past the security guard and ask the receptionist if they have heard of a Solani, or Solati hotel, but they are only confused. I see a rack of maps and ask if I can take one. I return to the taxi with my map and arrive at Sonati in two minutes. I am checked in by a friendly, nervous man from Montana, Shad. I meet my dormmates, an Australian couple named Simon and Eleanor. After I lock my belongings in the dorm locker I ask Shad where I should go for food. He is about to be finished with his shift and says he will take me to a great food stand. I wait a few minutes and we set off into the night.

We walk for ten minutes or so, straight along a lit street. Soon the street crowds, although it is approaching nine o'clock. Shad explains that the baseball game is just getting out. We walk through the traffic and find the stand nearby, flocked with patrons. Great circular grills hold skewers of sizzling meat. There is a table covered with cheese, salad, and tortillas, and giant pots of rice and beans on double boilers. Shad supplies me with a plastic container and I pick out enough things to make two or three meals. We also order two licuados, juice drinks in plastic bags. The server expertly knots the bag around a straw, and we return to the hostel fully laden. I eat and head back out the door,



intrigued by this city full of people, still busy long after Rancho Esperanza would have settled in for the night. Shad had mentioned a live band playing at a nearby bar, Via Via. I follow the map there and find the bar filled with both travellers and Nicaraguans. The band is playing bossanova and Santana covers and I see my dormmates. We drink and try to shout over the music for a bit, until the band takes a break. I notice a contingent of young men with asymmetrical haircuts that would not be out of place at RISD or in Williamsburg. I introduce myself to one, whose name turns out to be Pedro. He tells me that he is an artist and a magician from Buenos Aires. He is living in Leon, selling arts and crafts and doing performances to pay his way to Mexico. I ask him if he knows any local poets, young people. I am looking for someone my age to translate for a project at school. He says he knows someone, and if I meet him at his hotel, the Chilean, in the morning, he will introduce me. At this point the band returns to the stage, and I lose myself in the music, the endless flow of cheap rum and cigarette smoke, and the inscrutable faces of every stranger in my path. I return late to the hostel, drunk, and collapse until morning.

11

I wake up and head out to look for breakfast. During the day, Leon's colors come out. Pastel pinks and yellows festoon colonial arches and columns. Bike taxis and street vendors are everywhere. I find a French-style bakery cafe named Pan y Paz and have a croissant and an orange juice. It's the first good bread I've had since I arrived. When I finish, I return to the counter and order a baguette and a napoleon for later. I drop these off at the hostel and return to the streets. I walk in the general direction of the Cathedral

de Leon, hoping to find the Parque de las Poetas and the central mercado. I pass a bookseller and buy two books in Spanish, one a collection and another book of Alfonso Cortes' work, the Artaud of Latin America. I come to the cathedral and come upon a row of street vendors, mostly selling mass-produced trinkets. I browse politely, smiling and saying hola to the vendors. I reach one table, a rickety, handmade stand really, covered in red cloth. The man sitting by the table is in his forties, with wild wavy hair. His pieces are different. Expertly linked silver wire and semiprecious stones, all hand-made, all with an original and distinctive style, angular and classical. Most beautiful to me are the turquoise pieces. I have always loved the stone, the whirl of greenish-blue closest to Caribbean waves, yet unique, inimitable. I hold up a bracelet: "Cuanto cuesta?"

"For you, one-fifty," in English. About six dollars. Jeweler friends of mine make similar pieces and charged closer to eighty. At the end of the table is a row of woven bracelets, very popular in Nicaragua. His bracelets are unique too, mixing vibrant colors with interesting weave patterns. I pick two of these as well as the bracelet and a pair of turquoise earrings. He tells me the price is three hundred and fifty cordoba, far too little for these pieces, even in cordoba. I give him four hundred and offer him a cigarette as he puts the jewelry in a bag.

He takes the cigarette and motions for me to sit by him. I ask him if he is from Leon. He says yes, that he was here and that he fought in the revolution against Somoza. "Ahora, estoy por la paz. You know paz? Peace man!"

"Yo tambien, mi amigo. Yo tambien por la paz."

We talk about politics and the war, and he shows me the bullet hole in his leg. He looks at me and retrieves something from his pocket, a twisted piece of metal on a leather lanyard. “This is the bullet that I took from my friend. He is still alive.” I tell him that I am a poet and show him the books that I had bought. “Alfonso Cortes. I know him. Here is a poema, in Spanish.”

Ramon takes my notebook and proceeds to write a poem there, from memory:

*La Bala*

La bala que me hiera  
será bala con alma.  
El alma de esa bala  
será como sería  
la canción de una rosa  
si las flores cantaran  
o el olor de un topacio  
si las piedras olieran,  
o la piel de una música  
si nos fuese posible  
tocar a las canciones  
desnudas con las manos.  
Si me hiere el cerebro  
me dirá: yo buscaba  
sondear tu pensamiento.  
Y si me hiere el pecho  
me dirá: (Yo quería  
decirte que te quiero!)

I know then that I am dealing with a madman and a poet, and that I can go with him and he will be my brother in this land. I ask him to have lunch with me and he agrees. He starts to gather his crafts into plastic bags. I help him, letting the links and stones pour smoothly through my hands. When the table is clear, he begins to loosen wingnuts on the underside of the cloth surface. The center of the red cloth surface dips as the legs collapse inward and in a minute the whole apparatus is bundled up like magic.

He stows the table in a nearby building, nodding to the security guard. We walk a block or two and come to a small cafeteria, open to the street. There are billiard tables in the back and mostly older men are hanging out, smoking, drinking sodas, and shooting pool. Ramon greets many of these men, who he says are his companions from the revolution. We order arroz, frijoles, carne, y ensalada. I have started drinking Fresca religiously, cold and crisp from green glass bottles. We eat and talk about rock music. He loves the Beatles, and I show him my I.D., that my last name is Lennon. He laughs and starts singing Imagine in a ridiculous falsetto. He tells me that he has a treat for me and that I am going to go to the family bar of Chepito Arreas. I have no idea who Chepito Arreas is until Ramon tells me that he is from Leon, the original conga player for Santana. The first Santana album is one of my favorites, found in my father's pickup when I first started driving. I agreed to meet him on that block at six that evening.

I return at six, and soon Ramon comes waddling up to me, his backpack of tools and jewelry on his shoulder. We walk for a long while, meeting people every few steps, friends who buy his jewelry or friends from the war, or family or friends of family. I say polite hellos as they ask where I am from and what I do. The number of revolutionaries met in a half hour walk would make any government tremble. We arrive at the bar, my mind buzzing with frustrated Spanish and excitement, and sit at a spare wooden table. The bar is dark and made of plain wood. The barkeep takes our order and brings a litro of Toña with two cold glasses and a half-packet of Belmont cigarettes. At the end of the room is a video jukebox. Ramon puts a ten-centavo piece in the machine and plays "Black Magic Woman", followed by "Wish You Were Here". We play American and

British rock and roll and drink beer and excellent Nicaraguan rum for hours. The bar stays relatively empty but each new person says hello to Ramon, embraces him, and shakes my hand. Here in Leon, there is a connection, a living vital thread that runs through everything. The night breathes and the people greet each other in the streets. Walking home, drunk, we stop at another street side stand for the fourth pack of cigarettes of the night. Ramon says the vendor was a contra, and that they fought against each other in the eighties. “Fuck Sandinista” says the man.

“Fuck the contras” says Ramon. They smile, at ease with their enmity. As we walk away, Ramon says “Before was the war. Now, we are only Nicaraguense, solo Leonense. He is my brother.” We continue on our way home, Ramon stumbling heavily for the last several blocks. We reach Sonati and Ramon takes my shoulder. “Mark, you are my friend. Buenes Noches.”

“Y tu es mi amigo tambien, Ramon.”

*La Bala* - from the Spanish, by Salomon De La Selva

The bullet that wounds me  
will be a bullet with soul.  
The soul of that bullet  
will be like the song  
of a rose would be  
if flowers could sing  
or the smell of topaz  
if stones could smell  
or the skin of a song  
if we were able  
to touch naked songs  
with our hands.  
If it wounds my brain  
it will say: I searched  
to probe your thoughts.  
And if it wounds my chest  
it will say: (I wanted to  
tell you that I love you!)

## CURRICULUM VITAE

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M.F.A. in Creative Writing (Poetry, English Dept.)  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas - Expected May 2013

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University of Rhode Island - May 2007

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### EDUCATION EMPLOYMENT

Graduate Assistant  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas - August 2010 - May 2013

### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

English 101 - Basic Composition  
English 101E/F - Basic Composition Extended  
English 205 - Creative Writing

### EDITING EXPERIENCE

Editor, URI Literary Review - Fall 2002, Spring 2003

### ONLINE TEACHING ENVIRONMENTS USED

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### PUBLICATIONS

Unquiet Desperation - Fall 2006 - "Heartbreak in 10 Haiku"

URI Literary Review - Spring 2004 - "Ragged Words"