

TO MY MUSE

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I admit it. I've grown
less fond of poetry
as I've grown old.
What once seemed bold
is commonplace, a howl,
a whisper, a groan.

I'm no longer dazzled
by philologists
arguing the subtleties
of antiquities. I'm baffled
by poets who succeed.

What's more, I never
really trusted
the trusty metaphor,
the smiling simile
grinning back at me
from the work-shopped page
of tomorrow's star.

I like my language

to be clear
as any summer day,
no affects to get in the way
when you, My Dear,
come calling.
Meanwhile,

I am here, waiting
in the twilit regions
of the lizard brain, listening
like a bride for that
first breathy whisper,
uncertain of whether you
are an angel or a demon.



TRUE PEACE

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Half broken on that smoky night,
hunched over sake in a serviceman's dive
somewhere in Naha, Okinawa,
nearly fifty years ago,

I read of the Saigon Buddhist monks
who stopped the traffic on a downtown thoroughfare
so their master, Thich Quang Đức, could take up
the lotus posture in the middle of the street.
And they baptized him there with gas
and kerosene, and he struck a match
and burst into flame.

That was June, nineteen-sixty-three,
and I was twenty, a U.S. Marine.

The master did not move, did not squirm,
he did not scream
in pain as his body was consumed.

Neither child nor yet a man,
I wondered to my Okinawan friend,
what can it possibly mean
to make such a sacrifice, to give one's life
with such horror, but with dignity and conviction.
How can any man endure such pain
and never cry and never blink.

And my friend said simply, "Thich Quang Đức
had achieved true peace."

And I knew that night true peace

for me would never come.
Not for me, Nirvana. This suffering world
is mine, mine to suffer in its grief.
Half a century later, I think
of Bô Tát Thich Quang Đức,
revered as a bodhisattva now— his lifetime
building temples, teaching peace,
and of his death and the statement that it made.

Like Shelley's, his heart refused to burn,
even when they burned his ashes once again
in the crematorium— his generous heart
turned magically to stone.

What is true peace, I cannot know.
A hundred wars have come and gone
as I've grown old. I bear their burdens in my bones.
Mine's the heart that burns
today, mine the thirst, the hunger in the soul.

Old master, old teacher,
what is it that I've learned?



BORDER SONG

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For Esteban Moore

Sometimes I like to read
the poets of the borderlands,
some in English, some to wrestle
slowly from their native tongue,
my scant Spanish failing at each turn,
the gists and piths of poetry.

There are images, there are tones,
that cross the rivers
of time and space and cultural bounds
to touch the heart of one
who struggles in the journey.
Poetry is made from flesh and bone.

What is a nation, what is our song,
and what is a man, a woman, but
a tear and a smile, un abrazo fuerte
por favor, tender and temporal,
wine in the cup, a song in the ear,

when the struggle itself is everything.

It is what we know and what
we have to work with—bare hands,
dreams that restore
big hungry hearts and minds
made whole by what we share:
mi pane, mi agua, mi canto amor.

