

THE GEOGRAPHY OF LEAVING



Poems by Silvia Curbelo

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following publications, in which some of these poems first appeared:

Berkeley Poetry Review: “Blue Dresses, White Lies”

Caliban: “Bedtime Stories” and “Spontaneous Human Combustion”

Indiana Review: “Christa: A Monologue”

Linden Lane Magazine: “Photograph from Berlin”

Shenandoah: “The Simple Geography of Leaving”

Tendrils: “One Day It Happens”

Willow Springs: “Some Nights You Crank Up the Car Radio and Just Drive”

Some of these poems also appear in the full-length collection,

The Secret History of Water (Anhinga Press, 1997).

for Tom

So many wings and no flying
—Gillian Conoley

Photograph from Berlin

Memory is the land standing still
for a moment, then a wave covers it.

Snapshots are shields—
what we remember in some way protects us.

In this particular one you're standing
on the balcony of your mother's house
waving at the soldiers passing through.

One of them, a handsome blond,
has caught your eye as he climbs
onto his friends' shoulders
to offer you something, some bread

or a piece of fruit, his lieutenant's
cap poised over his heart
in a delicate cartoon of love.

Behind you the sky seems to float in all
directions, but the light holds
everything in place.

You cannot know how your life
will measure up against this moment,
your arm frozen in midair.

Your white handkerchief is like a wish.

One Day It Happens

One day it happens: your lover
lights your last cigarette and becomes
a feather of smoke rising through your fingers,
a handful of nothing, a shaft of air.

It is the story of a man
running after a train
or whistling down some alley
while you stare down the long hallway
of his leaving, wondering
how will I live without?

One day the night rides in through the window
and unpacks its usual stars.
You lie on the thin bed
and feel the room
opening up like breath
when the last door slams behind you
final as a shot.

One day you lie alone
remembering the short barrel of his heart,
its single bullet.

Some Nights You Crank Up the Car Radio and Just Drive

Tonight the moon rises through
the trees like a daughter at her
own wedding making her way awkwardly
through the first dance.

On the edge of town the ancient
fields are picked clean
and the musicians know it,
gathering their instruments,
ordering one more round.

And the baker lost in his grim
wedding cake knows it,
thinking of a girl he met once
in a truck stop, how her face
came back to him for years
like a song on the jukebox
or the threadbare music
of the stars. How even then
she knew it too.

A thin stretch of road
is nothing to a sad man
with a fast car, a dozen
filling stations under
an empty sky. All the young
girls asleep in their dark houses
tired of waiting for the night
to begin. It's a quarter
past ten and the deacon forgets
his evening prayers, thinking
of a young man he knew once
in the army and the last time
he saw him, standing outside
a nightclub two miles east
of Saigon in 1969.

How the memory comes back
to him in pieces. His hands.
His snakeskin boots. His mouth.

Corsica Jean and Juanita's Palace

Girls weeping in the toilet at Strangers,
hair falling into their beer,
girls cursing into payphones,
girls waiting for a ride,
girls who stay drunk for a week,
girls with eyes staring back from some dead place
with caked blood on their lips,
girls with a story,
girls unbuttoning their coats
and leaning on the bar.

Love is a hard bread they've barely tasted
so if they ask for advice she'll tell them,
You've got to live with a bill stuck in your shoe.
Cab fare's the luxury of the brokenhearted.
Why walk through plate glass for some man?
All along Platt Street the darkness
is a prayer creeping over the Crosstown.
Too many nights and no sleep.
Coffee cup rings in all the book covers
laying around on countertops
like old friends who need no pampering,
who stay up all night to kill the wine.
She drags the blankets out onto the fire escape
to watch the last of the night
go sailing past, not exactly
a dreamboat, not a cruise for the queasy
of heart, salt in their beer,
out to a shore no river will wash clean.
Already the stars are blinking out
and all the girls standing out on some ledge
five stories up know she's no stranger
talking them down from the wrong side of the net.
And if they ask she'll tell them
there's no safety in numbers,
some rooms you can't find
your way out of for years,

still, nothing takes longer than you can bear it,
sometimes a man will take you in his arms,
let him look you in the eye,
let the sadness roll off you
like the words from any jukebox song,
beautiful snake with nothing in its heart,
life is one lonely cab
everybody rides.

for Gayle Natale

Blue Dresses, White Lies

Cuba, 1962

I remember her face,
the dry cleaner's stepdaughter.
She wanted to sing
but she couldn't.
Her brother smoking in the toolshed.
Her mother dead for half a year.

She'd stand at the window
her arms full of overcoats.
She'd say *Listen*
The songs on the radio are true

I fell asleep on the porch swing
and dreamed the empty dresses
came alive, slipped off
the wire hangers, went
to live in my house.
Her mother on the hill without music.
Her brother counting out the days
doing time.

In 1962 the streets were filled
with army trucks.
Teenage boys cradled machine guns
in their arms, their eyes
full of ribbons and numbers.

We'd lie on the bed
listening to her 45s, the words
pinwheeling in the dark
orphan cancer war

I was six, I was in love,
my favorite song was playing.
She wrote my name
on the soles of her shoes
and watched it disappear.

Christa: A Monologue

Jan. 28, 1986

Cape Canaveral

11:39. The morning holds
the last light up before
it crumbles.
I'm talking to you.
Already I know things
you can't imagine. Already
I feel the blue sky taking hold,
the way the pear tree imagines
its first blossom months
before the first snow disappears.
I see you standing in your plaid
blue shirt, a man in his own
country, your hand encircling
Caroline's white wrist, and
behind you, the town. The rows
of A-frames climbing up
Mortgage Hill, the school,
the supermarket, the municipal
pool, the county jail.
All that longing like
railroad tracks in summer
when I was a child watching
the whole sky going out, the small
shining worlds climbing
out of the dark.

That summer night walking
under the same thin and distant stars
you said *forever*, and now
it comes to this.
I see your face, a kind of miracle,
and I feel myself lifted
through myself, the way
a vessel becomes the thing contained,
so that later, the water forgets

the cup. And I see my hands
reach out for something else,
a child pulling a ribbon off
a Christmas box all in a moment
and the moment turns to breath.

I say your name.
I say it once, *Steve*,
and the name tumbles out
of reach and rolls down into
the light, the tiny world
below, across the city, and past
the solemn traffic, and back
into the wind again,
and past the hill, the immense fields,
and past the tall pines
standing like lone women,
each with a sad, exotic name.

And all the names come back
to me at once. I want
to tell them to you.
The names of rivers, the names
of trees, the proud mystical
names, the words I love, *henna*
and *cypress* and *skylark*,
the names of flowers,
the hard names of the dead,
a white chain strung a thousand
times across the world.

Our children's names,
Caroline and *Scott*.
And my own name,
the one my mother taught me,
the one she whispered over
and over each night

leaning into my bed, her voice
like rain falling on
the blue earth.

Spontaneous Human Combustion

A telephone rings all night for no one. A trailer door slamming shut. Stars flying up like dust under car wheels. Sleeping in a barn in a windstorm. The letter she keeps in a locked drawer. A soldier kneeling down in the dust under a streetlight. He takes his last drink and he takes his last drink. A screen door blown clear off the hinges. A name like an overcoat thrown to the wolves. The blacksmith and his leather apron. The night-shift waiter wiping blood from his shirt. He wants to remember her telephone number. Found money. Hot nights. Looking for the key at the bottom of the well. A letter opener with *Toledo* written across the blade. The moon like a bucket of rainwater tossed over the yard. Heartbreak. White shoes. Stars the size of cadillacs. If the phone rings don't answer it. The novelist leaning across the bar saying *I wrote the book for the girl*. Smashing the bottle. Starting from scratch. Keeping a promise like a wild dog by a river. Wind blowing through the slats.

Bedtime Stories

after Marc Chagall

Say it isn't real.
Say this violin is not a window.
The rose opening up from its shadowy heart
conceals its stupid thorn
like a child before his first mirror.
But a painting is not a mirror.
The colors are not real.
The flowers swaying in the hushed light
tell us a different story
and the child drifting through a landscape
of trees and numbers cannot hear it.

The trees are the one constant,
always touching the earth
but reaching for something else.
The violin itself is not color
but lightness. The music
rising beyond the highest
branches imitates flight,
sleep, a kind of floating.
That happens long before the idea
of falling enters the picture.
We attempt to grow graceful and weightless.
We leave our shoes behind.

This is the pure air of a painting
like a child before an open window
waiting for someone to begin
the next story, to bring him
his nightly drink of water
or lay beside him on the little bed.
The bed can be a mirror,
but not as real,
not at all like a painting
or a rose. His head resting

on the pillow is so sweet.
It could never be a tree,
it grows inward, rootless,
floating towards sleep.

Already we know this story
is not real, the colors
are too vague. The child
closes his eyes and imagines
the rest of his life
like a dream about falling
from a great height.
But this is early on,
before sleeplessness, before
he comes to terms with the idea
of gravity and the window
shuts completely in his dreams.
He will lose track of the story.
He will stare at the ceiling.
He will learn to count sheep.
This is a prelude to something else,
something that comes much later,
not sleep, but a kind of falling
through himself in layers,
a sheaf of numbers
adding up to the one belief,
a feeling he can count on,
the pure mathematics of desire.

It happens slowly. He begins to see
himself in multiples of two,
of four, the world unfolding
in a graceful symmetry, two lips
two breasts, then his own longing
multiplying, becoming

a mirror to the girl
who is beautiful, who lies
in his two arms, who is
like a painting or a rose
or music going on somewhere else.

This happens earlier,
before he learns to think in multiples
of three, before coming face
to face with his two hearts,
the other one that grows
much later, that thorn
leading up to their first kiss,
the first betrayal, the other woman
concealed behind a smokescreen
of desire. These too are dreams
about falling. He falls out of step,
falls short, falls for a woman
the way a child falls asleep
before the story ends.

He has now entered a world beyond
all his calculations. He begins
to count backwards to the first
color, the first sleep, the first
music playing. That happens earlier,
much earlier, before he learns to count
on this completely: Love ends,
stories go on untold
for years, the colors fade
into the background, vanish beneath
the body's clumsy light.

But this is not a painting
he can live with. The trees are thick
and ugly. His own face floats

out of any mirror
like the soul out on a limb,
no longer a child facing an open window
but a man having learned
the weight of dreams.

For All the Goodbyes

In a room not unlike this one
someone is always leaving someone else.

Someone blows out a candle.
Someone has finished the wine.

The single glove laid open
on the windowsill tells only

half the story. Try to imagine
the hundred metaphors for flight,

for endings, a door finally closing
and what is left behind—

the robe with its torn lining,
a scarf, cufflinks, an old shoe.

A man's abandoned overcoat
brings to mind

trains stations, suitcases,
footsteps vanishing down the hall.

There is no mistaking
the closet door left ajar,

the empty hangers
like the thin shoulders

of loss, of distance.
If you have loved

someone like that
you have imagined his hands

opening other doors, unbuttoning
his shirt in other rooms.

Even as the buttons fall away
there is no turning back.

A dropped shoe is an island.
A scarf will break your heart.

The Simple Geography of Leaving

A man stands on his front porch
hoping the crops don't freeze.

It's the last leg of a bad season.
He'd like to walk the feeling off.

This is a story like the first
wheel turning over.

The house is dark.
The wind climbs down.

He moves from room to room.
Every door is a hand around his heart.

Looking into a mirror is a kind of leaving.
He sees himself already coming back.

His wife's soft breathing fills the air.
The bed is still as a lake, and cold.

He could row himself out
with his eyes closed.

He walks out on the porch
just as the first snowflakes hit the ground.

Distance is like a stone beneath the water.
The pieces keep floating up for years.

The Lake Has Swallowed the Whole Sky

Some dreams are like glass
or a light beneath the surface of the water.

A girl weeps in a garden.
A woman turns her head and that is all.

We wake up a hundred times and
don't know where we are. Asleep

at the wheel. Saved by
the luck of angels.

Everyone touching his lips
to something larger, the watermark

of some great sorrow. Everyone
giving himself away. The way

the rose gives up the stem and
floats completely, without history.

In the end every road leads
to water. What is left of a garden

is the dream, an alphabet of longing.
The shadow of the girl. Perfume.

Silvia Curbelo's latest full-length collection of poems, *Falling Landscape*, was just published by Anhinga Press. She is the author of another full-length book, *The Secret History of Water* (Anhinga Press) and a chapbook, *Ambush*. Awards include poetry fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs, the Cintas Foundation and the Writer's Voice, as well as the Jessica Noble Maxwell Memorial Poetry Prize from *American Poetry Review*. Her poems have been published widely in literary magazines, and more than two-dozen anthologies, including Helen Vendler's *Poems, Poets, Poetry* (Bedford/St. Martin), and the *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*. A native of Cuba, Silvia lives in Tampa, Florida.

