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“The breath is alive / with the equal girth of words”: Tino Villanueva in Interview

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“In my head / was a roaring of light.” The phrase appears in “The 8 O’Clock Movie” (16), an opening poem in Tino Villanueva’s collection *Scene from the Movie GIANT* (1993). The speaker uses it to describe the 1973 experience of re-seeing a black-and-white television version of George Stevens’s 1956 Hollywood screen classic, with its sumptuous wide-screen portrait of Texas oil and a wildcatting dynasty, and its contrast of Anglo and Latino lives. The phrase could readily apply to almost all of Villanueva’s writings. Since he made his entrance with *Hay Otra Voz Poems* (1972), he has established himself as a frontline literary presence, adept in both English- and Spanish-language verse. Among his Latino/a literary generation—notably Bernice Zamora, Alurista, Martín Espada, Gary Soto, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Tato Laviera, and Carmen Tafolla—he is seen as a Chicano poet of bicultural word and history yet wholly endowed with his own rare gifts of voice.

Villanueva has written a great deal from an awareness of struggle—rural and small-town poverty and discrimination based on ethnicity, identity, gender, and language politics. Yet important as these concerns have been, they by no means bespeak Villanueva’s whole repertoire. *Hay Otra Voz Poems* offers love poetry (“I Saw The First Leaf Fall”), poetry of earth and space on the occasion of the Apollo 11 mission (“Redeemed”), and existential reflections (“Autolaberinto”); yet it also contains the sequence “Mi Raza,” with its vistas of back-breaking migrant field labor and itinerancy in the Southwest. The opening pieces in *Shaking Off the Dark* (1984) take up the nature of creativity and writing. The collection also includes Villanueva’s taste for haiku in “Right on Time”—“Together, all of / them coming out from behind / clouds: geese flying south.”

Across the poems, there can be no mistaking the irresistible press of memory. In “Empezando a saber”/“Beginning to Know,” in his *Crónica de mis años peores/Chronicle of My Worst Years* (1987, 1994), the English version begins:

I don’t know what got me to open
time’s damn doors
and see again
the dusty, gravelly barrio
where I learned to be less than I was. (13)

Remembrances of Villanueva's hard-scrub, Presbyterian migrant family upbringing in Texas, looking back from his Boston University professorial life that is so different from that of his childhood and youth, have produced a treasury of imaginative dividends.

Limited access to schooling, Army service in Panama from 1964 to 1966, college at Southwest Texas State University, and the draw of Chicano activism within a larger 1960s context of civil rights and the Vietnam War all helped shape Villanueva. In 1969 he enrolled for a master's degree at SUNY-Buffalo, and later for a PhD at Boston University. At both, and in both English and Spanish course work, his interest in poetry took on yet fuller energy, inspired by Dylan Thomas, T. S. Eliot, and the Beats, and the pan-Hispanic spectrum of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, Rubén Darío, José Martí, Federico García Lorca, and César Vallejo. His 1981 doctoral dissertation, which he expanded for publication in 1988, studied the twentieth-century Peninsular poetry of Gabriel Celaya, Ángel González, and José Manuel Caballero Bonald. The overall double focus was symptomatic. Given his historical cross-cultural milieu and legacy, how could Villanueva not write colinguistically, a poetry of landscapes lived in, and then inscribed in, the cadences of both English and Spanish?

As for the roster launched with *Hay Otra Voz Poems* and continued through *Shaking Off the Dark*, *Crónica de mis años peores*, *Scene From the Movie GIANT*, and the chapbook *Primera causa/First Cause* (1999), the judgments have rarely been less than favorable. Commentary understandably seizes upon Villanueva's unmistakable "commitment." Certainly he has been no sentimentalist about Chicano history—poem after poem speaks of loss and breakage ("my people's crippled history," he calls it in *Crónica's* "History Class" [5]) as much as the will to recognition and justice ("Take this faith I've framed / so you can keep this picture" he asks in "Anointing By Words" in *Crónica* [75]). A credo of sorts might be heard in "I Too Have Walked My Barrio Streets," with its echo not only of Alan Ginsberg but also of Pablo Neruda:

A poet's devotion, can't it reach beyond mere walking,
beyond found words
when the people are stirring into the glowing wind? (*Shaking* 54)

But these lines speak equally to Villanueva's self-aware need for exactitude of language in all the domains he addresses—love, place, creativity, or odyssey (the title of a key verse-group in *Shaking Off the Dark* and a link to his current interest in the Penelope myth). This self awareness is localized in the poem "Much": "The breath is alive / with the equal girth of words" (*Shaking* 3).

The interview that follows had its origins in June 2000 at the Multi-Ethnic Studies Europe and America Conference (MESEA) at the Université d'Orléans. Villanueva gave a reading of his poetry and it was my privilege to have been invited to deliver one of the plenary lectures. We spoke then of an interview and, over the past few years, this interview was conducted.

A. Robert Lee: You've often referred to being born into two worlds, Chicano and Anglo. A bilingual legacy, a bicultural legacy—what have been the advantages and disadvantages?

Tino Villanueva: I wasn't always bilingual, you know. I was born into a Spanish-dominant family, and such was my first language growing up in Texas . . . up until I went to kindergarten at the Campus Elementary School in San Marcos. I'd say that by second grade, for a kid of seven, I was a bona fide bilingual, reading *Dick and Jane* books quite easily. In this sense, I'm no different from other American writers whose first language was not English, and with whom I very much identify: Gertrude Stein, whose first language was German (she'd lived in Vienna to the age of four, later learning French in Paris); Louis Zukofsky, who grew up in a Yiddish-speaking household in New York; Jack Kerouac, who spoke French up to the age of six; and William Carlos Williams, who most likely grew up speaking English and Spanish from the start, as might be the case with Amy Tan with Chinese, and Charles Bukowski, born in Germany. Then there's Phillis Wheatley, believed to have spoken Wolof up to the age of about seven in her native Gambia, before being bought and brought over to Boston as a slave in 1761. What distinguishes me from these writers is that I have kept up with both my languages—I've studied, spoken, taught at the university level, written, and published in English and Spanish. No small matter. But this shouldn't surprise anyone—we live in multicultural America, after all. And to live in the Southwest—and in other pockets of the country—is to live in *bilingualandia*. The only regret I harbor is not having become trilingual—my French, alas, is nothing to brag about, my many sojourns in France notwithstanding.

ARL: And the disadvantages, if any?

TV: Allow me to tell you a story. From 1987 to 2000 I taught Expository Writing at MIT—fourteen straight summers. One morning, while walking across campus on the way to class, it struck me how fortunate I was to be bilingual and to be able to teach advanced Spanish conversation and

composition at Boston University during the regular academic year, and, in summer, Expository Writing at MIT . . . where I found myself teaching in my other native tongue, English, and from a completely different pedagogical, cultural, and literary standpoint. It was as if that morning I'd finally stopped—if only for a moment—to smell the roses, the epiphany being that somehow I'd “made it,” that I was a lucky fellow able to wear two professional hats in academia, and delighted in executing both roles.

I likewise recognize that being bilingual has allowed me to appreciate two literatures from two different traditions, one Anglo-American, the other Hispanic (Peninsular and Latin American), which for some time have been at the center of my literary upbringing. Surely, it's made me a sort of bare-minimum, comparative literature reader who derives benefit from these bodies of literature.

The drawback with handling two languages comes when you try to place with a publisher a bilingual manuscript in which there are poems entirely in English, others totally in Spanish, and still others in what one of my precursors, fourth-century poet Decimus Magnus Ausonius, would call “medleys of the two tongues”—those poems that code-switch. By this I mean the hybridized, interlingual, bisensitive, binary, *mestizo*, macaronic type of poems in which these two languages contain each other and carry the poems along to their final conclusion. From the outset, when I tried placing a manuscript of this sort, publishing houses promptly returned it, saying it contained extensive use of Spanish . . . submit it somewhere else. The Spanish-language publisher, on the other hand, convinced that the same manuscript contained too much English, suggested I send it to an English-language publisher. I could not make headway here, making it quite disconcerting for me in the beginning. I went through this rigmale with my first two books: *Hay Otra Voz Poems* and *Shaking Off the Dark*. For this very reason I made the conscious decision that from then on I would keep the two languages apart, alternating from one language to another with each volume of poetry. You may have noticed that my next book, *Crónica de mis años peores*, is in Spanish; *Scene from the Movie GIANT* in English; and *Primera causa/First Cause* in Spanish. With my current manuscript, *So Spoke Penelope*, I've returned to English. I hold out hope that one day a major US publisher will accept a work where both English and Spanish are intertwined. We need, anew, in this century, in this country, poets the likes of Eliot and Pound whose Modernist multilingual poems at the beginning of the twentieth century no one questioned.

ARL: In “History I Must Wake To,” the closing sequence of *Shaking off the Dark*, you speak with great poignancy of your Texas upbringing. Family, migrant-worker parents and cotton-picking, school and racial divides,

along with Lone Star triumphalism, were obviously key formative experiences. How, looking back, does “Texas” now resonate in your mind?

TV: Texas as a social family has come a long way since my growing-up days in the 40s and 50s in San Marcos, my hometown in Central Texas. The Civil Rights Movement—both black and Chicano—the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the oft-controversial Affirmative Action initiative, no doubt, have had a role in redressing some social and political wrongs for these two communities. Today we might even boast about what the activism of that period ushered in throughout the Southwest for Latinos. For one, more Chicanos are attending universities. This, in turn, has produced a larger white-collar class, including doctors, lawyers, engineers, business people, teachers, professors, and administrators of all sorts, including the field of law enforcement. I believe even the Texas Rangers have Mexican American officers now.

On some college campuses an attendant benefit has been the creation of Chicano/Mexican American Studies. More city councilmen and women and school board members have been voted into office, and so too mayors and governors, in addition to cabinet members appointed (for better or for worse) under both Democratic and Republican administrations in Washington. Visible as well on a daily basis are reporters, newscasters, sports analysts, and weather analysts on radio and television. And more intermarriage has taken place, I would say, between Chicanos and Anglos. These changes have been occurring for the past thirty-five to forty years. Add to the mix that the ethnic composition is much different now in many urban centers throughout Texas, beginning with the first influx of Vietnamese refugees brought to the Gulf Coast at the end of the Vietnam War. Other Asians have followed, making one feel that Texas has indeed changed, and continues transforming itself for the better. Change is evident at least in some metropolitan centers; change has to start somewhere.

ARL: After the army and being stationed in Panama in the early 1960s you went on to Southwest Texas State University, studying English and Spanish. It was there that you saw your first published poem, “Camino y Capricho Eterno,” later to be reprinted in *Hay Otra Voz Poems*. What led you to writing—and why poetry above all?

TV: My predilection for poetry can be traced to my tour of duty with the US Army in Panama and my having had several Spanish-speaking friends there. I was stationed at Fort Clayton in the Panama Canal Zone, but my friends lived on national territory and spoke no English. Several were educated types, who, from memory, could quote lines and passages

from Rubén Darío, José Martí, Porfirio Barba-Jacob, and Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera—the best-known Latin American *modernistas*—with whom I was not familiar at the time. I was impressed by the sound of the words as well as the thought behind them. And I was impressionable. Once discharged from the Army, and after working a few months at the same furniture factory I'd worked at before, I enrolled in two summer courses, Freshman Composition and Zoology, at Southwest Texas State University in my hometown, subsequently deciding to major in Spanish and minor in English. One of the first things I did was go to the library and look up the work of these celebrated poets I'd heard so much about. What a discovery to actually see those poems I'd heard recited, laid out neatly on the page—these and many more. I even began memorizing the same lines my friends had recited to me. In my first of two Spanish for Native Speakers classes I took with Professor Roberto Galván, we were asked to memorize, and recite in front of class, Adolfo Bécquer's "Rima LIII," one of the most anthologized of his poems. It was fall semester of 1966, and without being aware of it, I'd begun to fall in love with literature. From then on it was poetry I wanted to study and write.

The following year was pivotal: outside of class I was introduced to the poems of T. S. Eliot, the Beats, and Dylan Thomas. It was Thomas's work that captured my interest from the beginning. I read him constantly on my own, and writing and sounding like him became almost an obsession with me. In the end, I wrote three poems à la Dylan Thomas, all published in the *San Antonio Express-News*, while still an undergraduate. He was now my inspiration, my muse, someone for whom craft was a driving force alongside content—someone to emulate.

As for my English and Spanish literature classes, I didn't come out of any of them without having learned something new every time, whether we were studying poetry or not. I was a blank slate absorbing all the lessons I could on technique so as to improve upon my own poems.

ARL: The issue of voice has obviously been of considerable importance, as the title of *Hay Otra Voz Poems* underscores. The finding of your own voice, the use of inner voice, Chicano voice generally. How has this manifested itself in your poetry?

TV: When I was an undergraduate, I'd gotten some poems published, as I indicated—poems styled after my mentor and tormentor Dylan Thomas. In Spanish I wrote and published a poem imitating the rhythmic cadences of Darío. I'd also written "Catharsis," a poem infused with a jazzy-type beat. I'm almost certain I was reading Ginsberg around that time.

A couple of years later, in graduate school at SUNY-Buffalo, I realized

I could not go on imitating other poets. My mimetic exercises of sounding like these poets had served their purpose. I'd learned from them, from their own established voices; I now needed to find my own. Eventually, I did find another voice, and wrote many poems that didn't echo those of Thomas, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, or anyone else. I'm speaking of my voice in English, mind you.

Suddenly I was in Boston, arriving in late August of 1971, and the anthologies that put me wise to the "modern idiom" were, in order of purchase, Mark Strand's *The Contemporary American Poets: American Poetry Since 1940* (1969) and Hayden Carruth's *The Voice That Is Great Within Us: American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (1970). In the fall of 1974, I audited (at Boston University) John Malcolm Brinnin's poetry course, where the assigned text was *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. Shortly afterwards I wrote "Now, As We Drop: A Poem of Guilt." With it I came to the conclusion I'd definitely found my voice. The poem addresses Anne Sexton's suicide in October of that year and its effect on the speaker of the poem. The poem read well, and it not only excited me, but assured me that certain elements in it had worked in the poem's favor: the varied length of the lines, the pauses, the enjambment, the play on words, the off-rhymes, the recurring figurations, the confessional tone, and, above all, the way the narrative progressed from beginning to end—an autobiographical micro-story told in verse. It ultimately appeared in the *Texas Quarterly*.

Then by the late 1970s and early 1980s, I wrote "Haciendo apenas la recolección," an autobiographical farmworker poem in English. I consider this a companion poem to the Sexton one. When I'd finished it, I was thrilled with the way it had turned out, its presentation of subject, its rhetorical control, its typographical layout, realizing at once it was on par with "Now, As We Drop." When I get invited to read from my work, more often than not I read these two poems.

ARL: *Hay Otra Voz Poems* steers not only between Spanish and English but also between a sense of public realm and private self. On the one hand there is "Redeemed," with its reference to the Apollo 11 mission, and on the other hand "The Process of Myself" and "Autolaberinto," with their sense of self as its own infinite theater. Were you conscious of seeking a balance?

TV: When I wrote these poems I was oblivious to the fact I was writing poems relegated to the two categories you bring up. I was an undergraduate, a fledging writer who had just begun to write poetry and, as a consequence, was not that discerning. What I was conscious of, nevertheless, was that I did not want to be perceived as a writer of exclusively one type of poetry.

It was to my mind essential to be a poet able to touch on many subjects and themes and write about them respectably well. I don't now know how I came to that determination, but I can assure you I was very aware I did not want to be considered a one-trick pony. And so I wrote a poem about an archetypal drunk ("The Inebriate"); preparing for final exams ("Catharsis"); love ("I Saw the First Leaf Fall"); the Apollo 11 Mission ("Redeemed"); creativity and self-identity ("The Process of Myself" and "Autolaberinto"); and a portrait of my amateur watch-smith grandfather ("Escape"), plus all the varied Chicano poems in the last section of the book. I'm immodest enough to say I thought I'd accomplished something compelling and unique with my first book. *Hay Otra Voz Poems* came out in July 1972, and I firmly believed then, and still do today, that no Chicano poet at that time was writing what I was writing.

ARL: "Mi Raza," the closing sequence in *Hay Otra Voz Poems*, takes up *chicanismo*—Texas, cotton, the pachuco, the murder of Rubén Salazar, La Raza. How far did you want your poetry not only to be *about* politics and historical redress, but also to be taken as a *form* of politics?

TV: The title of the book, *Hay Otra Voz Poems*, already hints at something novel on the Chicano/American poetry scene—a voice in three registers: standard English, standard Spanish, and the hybrid bilingual form. It's true the poems in the section you mention are of ethnic affirmation and are political, but, above all else, the writers of my generation—of the Chicano Renaissance—were trying to carve out a space in the larger estate of American poetry. Most certainly it was a political act; but my poems were an aesthetic act as well, claiming for themselves, or at least I tried to make it so, the well-turned phrase, the tight economized line, the tropes of language put in the service of art.

ARL: *Shaking Off the Dark*, your second bilingual collection, contains a variety of verse forms—poems in response to painters, poems of locale (Spain especially), existential poetry, and haiku and tanka. How far did you see yourself a consciously experimental poet?

TV: I have to go back to the notion I brought up before: that I wanted to be all over the lot, and be a versatile and eclectic writer capable of taking on many subjects, moods, dramas, and psychodramas. By virtue of that, I wanted to be known as someone who could range out thematically and cover different emotional ground. So anything was my subject—anything I was inspired by.

As for the haiku, what can I say, but that I was very taken by this min-

ature poetic form when I first discovered it, summer of 1972. Three brush strokes—three lines is all a poet has to work with to make a visual and auditory impression. I discovered the haiku when I read Sergei Eisenstein's essay "The Cinematic Principle and the Ideogram," where he lays out his theory on film montage and, in so doing, he speaks about the similar effect of the Japanese haiku. No doubt I learned about film theory; however, I was more drawn to what he pointed out about the haiku, which led me to write some myself. Wanting to read more of them, I bought Harold G. Henderson's *An Introduction to Haiku: An Anthology of Poems and Poets from Basho to Shiki* (1958). There I was introduced to the tanka as well. All this motivated me to write eleven haiku and three tanka in both English and Spanish.

On the question about my being experimental, I would say I'm being far more experimental in my next book, *Crónica de mi años peores*, where in one poem I intercalate two short musical scores from Mexican Chicano children's songs ("Primera evocación"), and in another I insert a drawing of the Tlacuilo, the Aztec scribe ("Cuento del cronista"/"The Chronicler's Story"). An explanation of these extratextual elements is found in the *Notas* at the back of the book.

ARL: A number of readers interpret *Shaking Off the Dark* as sacramental, if not religiously centered. Is that fair?

TV: Many of the poems in this book might have a touch of the contemplative . . . the meditative, certainly; and others might border on the existential. However, I don't recall ever consciously casting a poem within a religious mold. I did write one poem of this sort as an undergraduate, but I wrote it more as an exercise than as a declaration of religious conviction. This poem was struck from *Hay Otra Voz Poems*.

Generally speaking, I would say poems are what they are; they do what they do. Some of them, if deep-textured enough, will admit multiple interpretations, and the latter are left up to each reader, as you know. One is not privy to what each reader may or may not derive from what they read—you get out of literature what you bring into it.

ARL: Is a poem such as *Shaking Off the Dark's* "Speak Up, Chicano, Speak Up" more than simply "political," not least its existential close of "I am free to act, but I must act to be free"?

TV: Speaking of existential poems, here's definitely one that was intended to be one. It was written in the mid-1970s in the heat of the moment at a time when in Boston-Cambridge many of us Chicano graduate and under-

graduate students were active on campus and/or in the community at large, picketing either supermarkets for carrying non-United Farm Workers Union grapes and lettuce; liquor stores for selling Gallo wine; or in front of Filene's Department Store for carrying Farah Manufacturing apparel produced in their El Paso factory where Chicano employees had declared a strike that lasted twenty months. The poem itself addresses different layers of Chicano society—farmworkers, service industry employees, and university students. And the poem is meant to, ideally anyway, “move the masses” as a first step to bettering their lot in life all around.

This *engagé* poem is a call to action and a reminder, as it were, that you can curse the darkness, but nothing will change if you don't yourself light a candle. Therefore, you're correct when you say it's a poem more than simply “political” for the very lines you quote: “I am *free* to act, but I must *act* to be free,” which dramatically underscore the existential will. It should be evident that from beginning to end, the poem progresses on this existential faith, its dominant rhetorical feature.

ARL: *Crónica de mis años peores/Chronicle of My Worst Years* exhibits your great interest in the uses and play of memory. You speak in “My Narrow Frame of Time” of the “mirror of memory.” Why has memory been so important a dynamic in your writing?

TV: You and I have memory . . . we all have memory. I am of the belief, however, that for some creative writers, to simply recollect something is an incomplete process. The next step is to write it down. If it's significant enough—judged from afar in time, and from the writer's perspective—commit it to paper, I say. Make memory serve as inspiration—memory as muse, and ultimately, memory as identity. So you see, memory, for me, becomes a useful device to go back in time to recover a history which would otherwise be lost—a personal or communal history, no matter how lackluster or unsettling that history might have been. In ethnic American literature, memory has been the prime mover, the trigger mechanism that has inspired many significant works, beginning, perhaps, in modern times with Alex Haley's *Roots*. In the beginning there was *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*.

Although memory already appears in *Shaking Off the Dark*, at the time I wasn't aware of its implications and thematic possibilities. Memory doesn't come into prominence until *Crónica de mis años peores*, where it gets thematized; it continues into *Scene from the Movie GIANT* and develops into the exclusive theme of *Primera causa/First Cause*, a chapbook of ten poems on memory and writing. Finally, memory is once again present in the manuscript I've just completed, *So Spoke Penelope*.

ARL: “Convocation of Words”/“Convocación de palabras,” one of the key poems in *Chronicle*, mentions “trails of living blood / on the ever-present paper”—nothing if not a stirring image. Do you find yourself drawn to this kind of reflexivity? How much has it been a part of your poetic practice?

TV: Now you’re giving me a chance to elaborate a bit more on the subject of craft—the plunging of yourself headlong into the writing of a poem. What I’m trying to get at in the lines you quote is the one-mindedness, the dedication and precise pursuit that go into composing a poem. I’ve never found it an easy task to write a poem, you know. Poetry is inspired speech—I know this. I also know what Graham Greene once said: that the role of the writer is to write a masterpiece each time. My poems go through multiple revisions and drafts—fifty, eighty, one hundred, some as many as one hundred and fifty. After battling and quarreling with the words, the poem, in the end, has to read right, sound right, and look right on the page. If I can give the poem some sort of typographical appeal, much the better. Once satisfied with what I’ve written, after the many changes and all the orderly steps of revision, only then do I declare it finished and ready to be sent out to see the light of day.

ARL: *Primera causa*, among other things, looks to your own purposes as a writer, notably in “First Cause To Name Me,” with its opening lines: “I write I stop writing I write / Sometimes I get so distracted I walk away.” Can too great a self-consciousness be weakening?

TV: I couldn’t say if this self-consciousness can be weakening or not. What I’m aiming to put forward in these lines is process—the process of writing and the physicality of it. In other words: what the writer goes through at the moment of committing words to paper; the writer’s contemplation on the purpose and consequences of his/her writing, sitting down and getting up from the chair . . . down to the kind of writing instrument the writer uses (pen, pencil . . . or computer). I’ve always said we have too few poems that deal with this subject—call it a portrait of the writer writing. I’m sure there must be such poems out there; the one that comes the closest to what I’m referring to is Seamus Heaney’s “Digging” from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966).

In my first book, there’s already one poem that touches on this subject: “The Process of Myself” (with a little help from the Henry Miller epigraph). Here’s a partial listing of others: from *Shaking Off the Dark*, “Much” and “Something Beyond Light”; from *Crónica*, “Empezando a saber”/“Beginning to Know”; “Tú, por si no otro”/“You, If No One Else”; “Cuento del cronista”/“Chronicler’s Story”; “Convocación de

palabras”/“Convocation of Words”; and “Unción de palabras”/“Anointing by Words”; from *Scene*, the opening poem “Scene from the Movie GIANT,” and notably the last three poems; and, finally, nine of the ten poems from *Primera causa* touch on some aspect of the process, with “Más la voz que el tiempo”/“Voice over Time” being the most telling.

ARL: *Scene* has become one of your best-known volumes. What most did you want to achieve in the poems that make up the sequence?

TV: Ever since the book came out in 1993, I’ve wondered what exactly it was . . . what deep-down, unconscious impulse drove me to write the book. I’ve concluded it may have been this: I wanted to give that inarticulate boy of fourteen a voice. The boy who went to see the movie that day was overwhelmed by the next-to-the-last scene that showed people who looked like him being shoved around for the simple fact of being Mexican American, and for the simple act of wanting to dine at a roadside café in 1950 in rural Texas. It had unsettled him . . . reminded him of his social and racial standing in his home state.

He had heard stories like this from his family about neighbors who, driving through New Braunfels, or passing through Giddings, had stopped at a similar roadside eatery for hamburgers and coffee, and were refused service. So the scene played out on the screen turns out to be too much reality for him—it is a “make believe world that is / real,” if I may quote from “On the Subject of Staying Whole.” Mind you, he’s that same boy who wants to say something in “Clase de historia”/“History Class,” but can’t. There, he’s got “no weapon . . . / to wield / against the long speeches / of that teacher.” At the Holiday Theater, he has no way to stop the action, to get the projectionist to “stop the last / reel of the machine.” Only when he grows up and becomes a writer—which the reader discovers by the end of the book—does he go back in memory and time, stopping, slowing down the scene segment by segment, to rescue that young boy, and give him, finally, a voice, one of a grown-up author who can now speak up and respond by deconstructing that café scene and morally condemning that social reality of a segregated Texas past. I’m no psychologist, but if I were to allow one to probe deep into the psyche, it wouldn’t surprise me to find that this one motivation is behind my having written the book.

ARL: Texas, racism, and identity all weigh in *Scene*. What did you find in the movie itself that best suited your goals in terms of imagery?

TV: I don’t believe I took much from the film regarding imagery, or at least I didn’t make it a priority to do so with every poem. In any event,

here are three instances I could mention where the imagery is dictated by the movie: 1) in “The Benedicts (up-close)” I’ve taken cattle imagery, the “hoof-beats,” and presented them as text-producing, pounded into the ground as a mark-making activity by this wealthy rancher family: “they . . . have / Written their hoof-beats upon the land and / Named it,” with “written” resounding as “ridden”; 2) in “The Serving of Water” I mention landscape, i.e., the flatness of the terrain outside as seen through one of the café’s windows: “At a booth, here, on the warm, sketchy plain / Of day”; and 3) in “Text for a *Vaquero*: Flashback,” certainly cowboy culture and its terminology were useful in order to create a biography and identity for the nameless elderly man who comes into the café with the two women, and whom I envision as having been a cowboy in his younger years.

Related to this is my use of film lingo for titles, stage directions, and transitions to advance some of the poems. So you will note, for example, “The little bell on top of the door is / Heard, as the door opens,” taken directly from the script of the film, which I found at the library at the University of Iowa; “(Jump cut / To Sarge),” “Stop-Action: Impression,” and “Fade-Out-Fade-In” are the titles of poems; and (*upwards shooting-angle*) serves as another stage direction. In the practice of ekphrastic art—a verbal representation of a visual representation, which is what *Scene* is—intertexting is one of its features, that is, the creative exchange of taking artistic devices of the first text (the cinematic representation) and incorporating them into the second text (the written poem).

ARL: What led you to the modern Spanish authors who were the subject of your dissertation and subsequent book on Celaya, González, and Caballero Bonald?

TV: You must be referring to *Tres poetas de posguerra: Celaya, González y Caballero Bonald (Estudio y entrevistas)*, which carried a different title as a doctoral dissertation seven years earlier and was about a hundred pages shorter.

What sealed my fate toward Peninsular writing was receiving a scholarship from SUNY-Buffalo to study at the Universidad de Salamanca in the summer of 1969, with the additional promise of a Teaching Fellowship when I enrolled as an MA student that fall. I received this unbelievable offer from SUNY’s Department of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese and, with it, my ticket out of Texas. I was elated. It was an offer I wasn’t about to turn down. I accepted it and never looked back.

I enjoyed everything we were assigned to read in class both in Salamanca and later at SUNY-Buffalo for the next two years. After receiving my MA in 1971, I applied for the doctoral program at Boston University and was

accepted. I continued taking more Peninsular literature courses than Latin American ones, and it seemed perfectly natural to go back to Spain and study some more, this time with Bryn Mawr College's summer program in Madrid in 1974, and eureka!—from the poetry course I took there, I found my dissertation topic: the mid-century poetry generation that included none other than poet-novelist José Manuel Caballero Bonald himself, who was my professor that summer. I learned much from him, certainly. For one, he spelled out clearly the historical background to several generations of Spanish poets of the twentieth century. But the key lesson for me centered on craft; his generation might have been political during the Franco regime, as manifested in most of their poetry (1955-1963), but these poets never abandoned the aesthetic component of the poem. You might have noticed that *Crónica* attests to the influence this poet had on my work. I realized one day that he had turned out to be my Dylan Thomas in Spanish—one is just as baroque in his use of language as the other. To quote Caballero's sense of the baroque: "Everything that is not baroque is journalism."

ARL: In English-language writing you were drawn early to the Romantics, the Beats, and Dylan Thomas. Why these? Why especially Thomas—after all, it's imaginatively no small journey from San Marcos, Texas, to Swansea, Wales?

TV: I've recounted thus far only part of the story regarding Dylan Thomas. In the fall of 1967 I went to see Ben Archer, the professor of the English Romanticism course I was taking, to show him a poem I'd written on the Vietnam War. The poem was in neatly rhymed stanzas. His initial remark was that I was writing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry. He then brought out the Oscar Williams and Edwin Honig anthology of *Major American Poets* (1962) and read to me a free verse, unrhymed poem by E. E. Cummings, "i sing of Olaf glad and big," as an example of a more modern poem, and one representing another view on war. Archer made other comments, then suggested I go talk to the creative writing instructor, Norman Peterson, whom I didn't know. I went to his office, and, after looking over my poem, he essentially echoed Archer's words: that in the twentieth century poets don't rhyme anymore; rather, they depend on fresh imagery, figurative language, adding that I needed to familiarize myself with the "modern idiom." At that moment I didn't quite fathom what that meant. He then proceeded to show me some examples from the works of Eliot, the Beats (Ginsberg, Corso, and Ferlinghetti), and Thomas: he pointed out Eliot's striking image in "Gerontion" ("In the juvenescence of the year / came Christ the tiger . . ."); he read to me from Corso's

“Marriage”; and showed me the off-rhymes and musicality of Thomas’s poems. I didn’t realize it then, but those ten minutes or so became a life-changing moment.

I thanked the professor for his suggestions and left his office wanting to read more by these poets. I found Thomas most engaging. His poems simply resonated differently. His use of alliteration, compound adjectives, monosyllabic words strung along in a row, images, cadences, and the intensity with which he expressed himself drew me to his work. If language can seduce, he seduced me. As I said before, there was a period when his work was all I read. This was followed by my purchasing his double album, where he recites many of his poems—yet another delightful discovery. What a superb reader I found him to be, as if the poetry world didn’t know this already. Listening to him read, I could tell he was pouring himself into his poems. From then on my high aim was to write like him; and thus he became something like required reading for me—and required writing as well.

Flash forward, and miracle of miracles: through Stanley Barkan, my editor in New York, Cajun poet Beverly Matherne and I were invited to read at the Dylan Thomas Centre in Swansea in May of 2007. The host and organizer of our visit, Welsh poet and professor Peter Thabit Jones, arranged for Aeronwy Thomas, Dylan’s daughter, to be present and read with us. Imagine that. The next day Jones arranged for Beverly and me to read at Thomas’s boathouse in Laugharne where Dylan and Caitlin had lived; later that same afternoon, we visited Dylan’s grave. You’re correct—no small journey from San Marcos to Swansea. To tell you the truth, I sometimes find it difficult to believe all that has transpired on this journey of mine. But such has been the road taken.

ARL: Your own creativity has long involved visual work—what forms has that taken? What relationship does it have with your writing?

TV: I’ve worked with oils and acrylics, and also with pastels. I’ve done one collage only. But it’s with mixed media where I think I do my best work. Here I combine crayon, pencil, pen, and watercolor, and have gotten the most fortunate results. Some of my drawings have appeared on covers of my books, as well as in the pages and covers of national and international literary and cultural magazines. In December of 2007 my work was on exhibit in “The Writer’s Brush: An Exhibition of Art by Writers” at the Pierre Menard Gallery in Cambridge. About 120 writers were represented, and among works by Elizabeth Bishop, Jorge Luis Borges, E. E. Cummings, Jack Kerouac, Henry Miller, Kenneth Patchen, Sylvia Plath, and others, were three of mine. I was told one of my paintings had made it

into the yet-to-be published catalog.

As for your second question, I have to say I've never had a satisfactory answer. But I've often thought of what Gore Vidal once said: that it's not uncommon for someone who is talented in one artistic medium to be likewise creative in yet another artistic form. It makes all the sense to me.

ARL: What do you have under way in your current writing?

TV: I just finished a manuscript of poems titled *So Spoke Penelope*—indeed, the Penelope of Homer's *Odyssey*. This consists of thirty-two poems, each spoken from the point of view of Queen Penelope, Odysseus's wife who for twenty years as a “war widow” holds out hope on the island of Ithaca for the return of her husband from the Trojan War. Her emotional and psychological states of love, hope, despair, and her own exercise of power within the palace, which she holds down for two decades until her husband's eventual return, make for a compelling psychodrama to explore, don't you think? Clearly she's an active force at the center of her own story. Fascinating she is, and more so to me because she's a “worker in wool.” Yet this is not amply expressed in the *Odyssey*—Penelope as weaver, Penelope as artist, which I've tried to flesh out. It's proven to be one of the most challenging and exciting books I've written. I consider it my best thus far.

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