

# **SELECTED POEMS**

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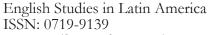
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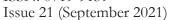
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# **Selected Poems**

Constanza Contreras<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Constanza Contreras is a PhD candidate in the English at the University of Michigan. Her dissertation project looks at racial configurations in the Americas from a hemispheric lens to complicate notions of Latinidad that have historically erased indigeneity and blackness. She focuses on visual and literary narratives and their lingering effects on the racial dynamics of contemporary nation states, and the intersections of race, gender and global indigeneities. Originally from Chile, Constanza is now living in Dublin, Ireland after four years of being lost in the American Midwest. A poet and illustrator, her work was recently featured in the anthology *The Breakbeat Poets Vol. 4: LatiNEXT*.

# The Excoriation of Prickly Pears

Girls of an age... are anchored in a faultline. It's a wonder they survive at all.

-Linda Gregerson

The woman tells her daughter with dermatillomania to stay still, do not fidget, do not tear the scab that keeps on growing on her scalp, running down her face like little feet of years, of ghosts past, of her mother and her mother and her mother.

The mother tells the girl to stop,

no man will love a woman with scars,

with a face full of holes.

Men only love the moon in poems and epics.

No man will ever love a woman with scars, and so she takes the nails to the already prickled skin, and scratches scratches scratches; an itch that cannot be tamed.

The girl feels the holes taking over, taking her whole. She wonders at seven if her mother's fear is real, and by twelve she knows that to bury a bullet inside a hole is the best type of armor.

By fifteen she collects scabs on her wrists, her breasts and back, and on the inside of her thighs. She knows no man will drench himself in desire and ask, what story does this one tell? Men, her mother says, care only for what's between the legs, no time to sing the stories your skin is carving in media res of adolescent sex.

Still, she marks the places where no man will ever love her, wonders how they fit now that her skin has grown to that of a tiger, legs and ass striped, --the body a straitjacket, struggling to contain this thing that lusts for endless space.

But the girl knows better than to take up space.

The girl lives now in a house without mirrors.

Her lovers —for she is loved— hide
her weapons of choice:
tweezers, comedone extractors,
nails, cuticle cutters,
hairpins, knives.

She waits for the time they will leave,
the time they'll squint their eyes and realize
hers is the face of a moon, the skin of a tiger.

Her mother has told her,

nobody will love you with a perforated face,

and she wishes she'd said the word man again, thinks

one will love you with the skin of nopales

and prickly pears,

so what is one feline stripe more,

even if self-inflicted,

a blade, a scratch marked rather than

the body

writing its story from the inside,

progesterone and muscle and fat?

And so the girl paints her body with more stripes, and even when Apollo tries to heal her heart with his tender touch, all she can see is the burned kisses he leaves, another man leaving traces on her, shadows with no permanence, kisses left on every spot she'd scratched before, Icarus incarnate.

## TO MY UNBORN CHILD

My daughter,

I have denied your coming since I was fourteen,

yet now you come before me in dreams,

with the eyes of the man I claim to love.

My daughter,

I walk with the uncertainty of your
existence, having denied you a fruit
of my womb, out loud, since time

immemorial, casting my land barren for too long, willingly,

the woman in me more woman she thinks.

As I wake up, I beg of you,

let our encounters be but in dreams.

My daughter,

I have given everything to avoid your arrival.

I have feared your smile since the first pulse of my clit.

I was taught to fear you the same way I was taught to fear myself. Of my body I have made a toxic wasteland, its plagues leaving their traces and scarring my face with their feet. And as the faithful colonized I welcome them with my arms open, set alarms for their arrival, mark my body's song around their schedule.

I have dismantled this house to avoid being your host.

I have feared your arrival, the dichotomy you would carry under your arm while you knock at the door.

Yet from my bed you reach up from within my womb and tickle my brain with warm lullabies that walk their small steps from my cleft to my neck and nostrils, the way the man I love does, while I feel his tender body,

and I imagine yours between us.

#### Atacama

(1)

The year before you left, we crossed the desert.

Eight hours of dry mountains saw our bodies safeguarded by a tin can traversing a reddish brown landscape. My body sat next to you on the passenger seat, not able to put her finger on that which was already withering.

(2)

I remember thinking, this desert is not like the movies but in a way it was:
since memory set its eyes on screens,
I had seen women searching, dusted ankles and hands, for signs of life. Had they been looking for water, I wondered, like the scientists? Hollywood has so many times used these colors as a Martian background. Were they looking for water just like the scientists were looking through white ears up, mile by stellar mile, in search of their own hope for life?

(3)

Only this land can hold such contradiction:

A vast desert falling into the sea. The Pacific a graveyard, the dry lands that kill actually protecting the bodies, the salt curing their skin and in eight hours of nothing, the sun raises between the mountains, as always, a witness to these mummifications.

I think about the ghosts that lift the dust as we drive. My mother says,

I fear the living who brought the bodies here.

hay que tenerle mas miedo a los vivos

que a los muertos, and I do:

(4)

You would think water is relief. You would think that.

After all, when scientists look at the sky in Paraná
and in ALMA they look up for watery souls
in the stars, in the galaxies,
while so many others look at the dust,
searching for what the desert has dried, hoping
for a follicle that allows recognition,
finding at times the sneaker they saw their son wear that day he left,
the memory of him fixed on the door's threshold.

In the driest desert, under blue light, they hold on to that
that shoe like it were a thousand clear rivers.

(5)

The desert is at least merciful. The desert kept their bodies, I think. A land of contradictions, the driest desert stands next to the biggest ocean, and we all know, oceans are not friendly water here. Oceans are not merciful with our bodies. Oceans leave no trace, oceans are too overflowing with life to care about sparing that half one falling, wrapped in plastic, a body open that opens and lashes the surface the pacific un-pacified, their life given. In this land, you can plunge truth from a puma onto the sea.

### **Fences**

I put up a fence between you and me,
made of the things I saw in our future
— too fragile to last outside of my foresight.

You see, I always build walls, as an alien in these flat lands, with no peaks to rise naturally, to secure the epidermis of

our bodies, with a compass broken, up-side down, with the spring saliendo a borbotones from my feet while inside the leaves are falling,

I still oppose the walls dictators erect to delineate borders. Perhaps the borders I set for us are no more stable than those of a paper nation:

Illusions, made up shapes held only by fire and toxic men — patriotism, the liquor that fuels its citizens, that fuels these dotted lines.

Walls that tear up bodies, that unbraid histories, that raspan los sonidos de la bocas, re-educan lenguas con otras lenguas imperiales.

Monuments erected on a graveyard aptly built on stolen land. Ni el verdugo ni el undertaker should hold the keys to where the bones meet their people.

I oppose these walls yet here I am, hands busy on mud and hay, patching up walls as it rains and melts with every storm that passes.

Secretly, as I build the wall you once asked me to tear down, I leave crevices open, I plan for estructuras endebles. I hope others will come in.

I pray for my wall secretly, to be porous, to let them through.