

Fire and Stars (a sonnet)
Huilloc, Perú

What if it's the sound of fire—the sound
that keeps us warm? and proximity is just
a manner of hearing across the dust
that settles to rest as we curl around
light and smoke, chins to knees, pant-legs browned
from kneeling in mud, from weaving in dust,
from bowing down to high altitude gusts
of wild mountain wind, which on this door pounds
ceaseless, into a night covered with stars?
As I quake with cold, how does she stay well?
What if mountain people can hear what's far—
the pop, whoosh, and crackle of dark-night stars?
Is there some Quechua secret to tell?
Teach me, please, to hear the stars' fire.

La Trucha

Huilloc & Patacancha, Perú

The fish still had its eyes—white and black
targets on my plate. This *trucha* and I were both frowning. I won't eat

a slab of salmon bought at the store, but here
es maleducado to turn down food, especially that given in thanks.

Gracias por su ayuda. ¡Coman! I dug into the pile of potatoes
first. Their boiled skin stuck to the fronts of my teeth and under my nails

but they were earthy and delicious. And then I found a worm. So many eyes
were on me and the other American who'd helped install the water filters, but she

was more clever than I. While *las mujeres* sat in the dirt with their plates on their laps
and plucked meat from the bones effortlessly, crunched the flakey scales,

this girl picked her fish apart, tucked some under the potato *pelas*,
smooshed the rest of the oily meat into her hand. *Perdona*, she said fake-coughing,

Necesito mi agua, está afuera. So she went and dumped her helping in the dirt.
I should have listened better to all the stories

my mother told me— clever ways she and her siblings stashed the food
they didn't want to eat. My grandmother always said "Waste not, want not,"

and then one day she found the table's little drawers
full of molding pork and cabbage.

All the women stared, raised their eyebrows, nodded in encouragement.
So I snapped off a fin, peeled back the brown-and-silver-rainbow crust,

and tried to pick around the skeleton without making eye contact
with my lunch. Two hours later, in a village higher up the mountain, we were greeted

in another smoky kitchen by the pop-pop-pop of fry oil. *Los indígenas* thanked us
con trucha y papas. I looked down at my plate, up at the men and women crowded

around the table, and ate everything I was given—except
the bones and the eyes.

trucha— trout

es maleducado— it is ill-mannered/rude

Gracias por su ayuda. ¡Coman!— Thank you for your help. Eat!

Las mujeres—the women

pelas— peels (potato skins)

Perdona...Necesito mi agua, está afuera.— Excuse me...I need my water; it is outside.

los indígenas— indigenous

con trucha y papas—with trout and potatoes

Constellations (a sestina)
Huillo, Perú

She kneels before the adobe oven and makes the kitchen's fire
dance. Her breath howls through the metal pipe like the wind
which stirs the mountain grasses and the dirt
while little men *toman cerveza bajo de las constelaciones*.
Her son comes inside, pulls the door against the cold.
I sit in the corner and listen to them speak

Quechua, a strange language to someone who does not speak
the harsh consonants. I move toward the fire:
a useless attempt to expel the cold
from the inside of my skin. The wind
snaps the dark like a sheet— the constellations
blaze above the mountains, glitter in the dirt.

I kick up little clouds in the dirt.
The woman and her son ask me to speak:
¿Cuál es la palabra inglés para las estrellas agrupadas? Constellations,
I tell them. *¿Y cómo se dice fuego?* Fire.
¿Y viento? Wind.
¿Frio? Cold. *Yo tengo frio*. I am so cold.

My muscles tremble as I quake with cold.
The three of us sit *en la tierra*
on old *oveja* hides and the door bangs in the wind.
Diego and I play cards *y hablamos*
español as Victoria peels potatoes and prods the fire.
Los hombres blow horns that echo off the constellations.

Diego leaves, lured by the constellations,
and exposes the kitchen to the brutal cold.
I watch orange peaks crest within the fire
and rub my pant legs, which are covered in dirt.
Victoria and I share no language; we speak
in glances and giggles. I wait for Diego. She hums to the wind.

Chased into dim kitchens by the battering wind,
the men leave the clear light of *las constelaciones*.
We spoon soup into our mouths and barely speak.
They do not seem bothered by the cold.
I watch their sandaled feet carve shapes in the dirt
and listen to *Victoria canta al fuego*.

*En el fuego, yo veo las constelaciones
y me hablan: no tengas frío.*
I feel like wind. I crawl across the dirt.

toman cerveza bajo de la constelaciones.— drink beer under the constellations
¿Cuál es la palabra inglés para las estrellas agrupadas?—What is the English word for groups
of stars?
¿Y cómo se dice fuego? – *And how do you say fire?*
en la tierra— on the ground (in the dirt)
oveja— sheep
y hablamos español—we speak Spanish
Victoria canta al fuego—Victoria sing to the fire
En el fuego.../...no tengas frío— In the fire, I see constellations, / and they speak to me: do not be
cold

Encrucijada

Desaguadero, Perú / Desaguadero, Bolivia

After fourteen hours sleeping slouched,
head against whizzing *campo*, I sit straight
when *la migra* kicks my boot. His are shiny,
black like his eyes.
The air outside is a frigid blue that ripples
the flag and the surface of the lake. *Desaguadero*.
Lo mismo en los ambos lados: in both Peru and Bolivia
this town is called “Drain.”

We filter through dingy hallways
and grayish rooms. We scratch
little letters with borrowed pens.
My back arches with the weight of my
sleeping bag, two other pairs of clothes
and too many books. *No dejes nada en el bus*.
El conductor no cierra la puerta
y he visto a que personas entran.
Passport. Cash. Cards. Forms.
Passport. Cash. *Tarjetas. Papeles*.
Passaporte. Dinero. Cards. Forms.
I pay to enter the country

porque yo soy americana.
Because red and white and blue mean green
and red and yellow and green mean dirt
poorest in South America.
Because I’m already here and I can’t turn back now
and *no puedo quedarme* in Drain.
The bus will leave without me
so I hand over 140 in 20s
for a sticker.

La frontera is nothing
like I imagined. *No*
hay un gran pared. No hay
barbed wire. But there are guns
held by *hombres que me dan miedo*.
I regret La Paz.
Caminamos por el puente.

Plantains are not bananas
and *no son para comer sin cocinar*
explains *una vendedora*.
Not good bus food.
I want rice pudding but the woman at the window
looks through my green eyes and out

the other side of my head to the men behind me
in line. Asks what they'd like.
All the *sudamericanos comen*
y toman café y IncaKola. I walk
back to the bus to pick maca cookie crumbs from the wrapper.

People at tables charge *soles* and *bolivanos* and *pesos*
to fill out customs forms for those who don't know
which letters to put in the little squares.

The bus is hot.
The first time in weeks I have not been cold.
I'm surrounded by travelers, tourists, drifters, and workers,
snobbish Europeans who hold towelettes over their noses,
and one pleasant Brit who, *gracias a dios*, shares his street *buñuelos*.
His Spanish isn't good—
he thought she said *un sol por uno*
so he paid five *soles*
but it was *un sol por tres*
so we feast on crispy oiled dough
dripping sticky with *miel*.

And the bus rolls on.

If I should feel different
 having been raised in a country
 where we are taught
 borders
I don't.

I bring *la frontera* with me.

campo—country/countryside

Lo mismo en los ambos lados—The same on both sides

La migra – immigration officer

No dejes nada ... que personas entran—Don't leave anything on the bus. The driver doesn't shut the door and I've seen people enter.

porque yo soy Americana— because I am American

no puedo quedarme en—I can't stay in

La frontera – border/borderland

No hay pared grande. No hay – There is no big Wall. There is no

hombres que me dan miedo—men that scare me

caminamos por el puente— we walk across bridge

no con comer...cocinar – they are not for eating without cooking

sudamericanos comen...IncaKola—southamericans eat and drink their coffee and IncaKola

buñuelos- fried dough, doughnuts

un sol por uno/un sol por cinco- one sol for one/one sol for five

miel – honey

Esperar
para Yuri

It took my uncle a long time to hear my mother yelling.
Her ponytail had caught in the lathe.
The switch was all the way across the garage and in the jumble
of machine noise, he heard only the flutter of sawdust.
When he finally looked up, bolted to the switch, my mom had lost
inches of brown hair. If he had waited just a little longer,
had been more absorbed in sanding that door——
I've heard stories. In shop-class. On the news. About hair
getting stuck in lathes. Scalps tearing from skulls, and worse. I wonder

how long it took someone to find Julian's van tipped
over the side of the mountain; *él estaba bien pero*
su amigo murió. After that, he vowed to stop drinking
la chicha. But that wasn't enough to save his little daughter's
life. The second time I stayed in Huilloc, his kitchen felt bigger.
It had been the altitude. Or was it the river? Her lungs failed,
or filled up. *¿Sabes que la pequeña murió?* asked Diego matter-of-fact
between games of slapjack. *Ella se sofocó*. Victoria met my eyes
but betrayed no emotion that I could decipher.

Esperaba que la niñita no tuviera que esperar mucho tiempo.

esperar— to wait/to hope

él estaba bien pero su amigo murió—he was alright but his friend died

la chicha— fermented (alcoholic) corn drink

¿Sabes que la pequeña murió?—do you know that the little (girl) died?

ella sofocó—she suffocated

espero que...tiempo- I hoped the little girl didn't have to wait long. Also, She hoped that the little girl didn't have to wait long.