

## Sierra Blanca

*"I asked God to help me out. But I'm pretty sure the others did the same thing."*  
—Miguel Rodriguez, one of 19 Mexicans found in an air-tight, steel-walled boxcar  
opened by border patrol agents at Sierra Blanca, Texas, July 2, 1987.

Inside it was 140 degrees.  
Insulated. Air tight. Locked.  
Eight hours from Dallas,  
they ran out of water.

*And Noah went in, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him into the ark  
because of the waters of the flood.*

Now jokes turn to panic.  
Clawing the floorboards. Beating  
the walls. Prayers and curses  
drowned out by the moving wheels.

*And God looked upon the earth, and behold it was corrupt, for all flesh  
had corrupted his way upon the earth.*

In Oaxaca, they earned 50 cents an hour:  
\$4.00 for an eight-hour day,  
\$20 a week, \$92 a month,  
\$1,114 a year . . .

*And the Lord said unto Noah come thou and all thy house into the ark,  
for thee I have seen righteous.*

The car was built to haul beer:  
9 kegs per skid, 12 skids  
per tier, 3 tiers.  
Room enough for 19 men.

*And the length of the ark was 300 cubits, and the breadth of it 50 cubits,  
and of lower, second, and third stories was it made.*

Naked in the suffocating heat,  
in the dark, they flailed and fought.  
They tore their hair. They moaned and wept.  
After six hours, they began to die.

*And God remembered Noah and every living thing, and God made a wind to pass over  
the earth, and the waters were assuaged.*

From inside, movement was hard to judge:  
they were boring to the center of the earth;  
they were flying at the sun. By morning,  
they came to rest at Sierra Blanca, the white mountain.

*And the fountains of the deep and the windows of heaven were stopped, and the ark rested in the 17<sup>th</sup> month on the 17<sup>th</sup> day upon the mountains of Ararat.*

In English, a voice cried, "Help us.  
Please. Help us." And the doors  
were drawn back and 18 men were dead.  
Illegals. Wetbacks. Pendejos. Aliens.

*And God spoke unto Noah saying go forth from the ark, thou and thy wife and they sons and thy sons' wives, and Noah went forth.*

Convulsions, heat stroke, seizures.  
Some chewed off their tongues—  
Their upturned faces ungodly,  
ungodly their unspeakable end.

*And God said unto Noah: I will set my bow in the cloud that I may remember my covenant with every living creature of all flesh.*

In ice their bodies were shipped south,  
back to the land of their dominion,

to their graveyards and families,  
their dry and sanctified earth.

*And these are the generations of the sons of Noah and unto them were sons born, and by these were the nations divided in the earth after the flood . . .*

## Mme. Curie

“The earth is a storehouse stuffed with explosives.”  
—Frederick Soddy, *The Interpretation of Radium*

She was the first to see: no center ever holds.  
It hadn't held when she was ten, her sister  
and mother dead of typhus and consumption,  
Russian soldiers in the Warsaw streets,  
her nation torn in thirds—*Poland* now *The Vistula*.  
Long before she stirred the tarry, acrid vats  
of Joachimsthal pitchblende, before Pierre was crushed  
to death at Pont Neuf, before her ruinous affair  
with his assistant, her mind was primed  
for what she found: instability at the core,  
the fixed unalterable atoms—building blocks of god—  
transmuting into other elements, the dream of alchemy,  
Ovid's “bodies changing into other bodies.”  
And her own body changing in the blue-green glow  
of radium, her *fleur du mal*—the slow destruction  
blooming in her bones. She was our physicist *maudit*:  
her journal dark as any page of Verlaine or Rimbaud:  
“All my will to live is dead. Tomorrow I'll be 39.  
“I do not love the sun and flowers anymore.”  
“Even my children cannot awaken life in me.”  
Nor could the lover she later begged in vain  
to leave his wife and family: “When you're with her  
my nights are a torment.” She knew each shifting  
isotope of loss, the mincing half-lives of the spurned,  
the deadening stability of lead. She took her Nobel Prizes  
and hid in darkened rooms: a “concubine” a “homewrecker.”  
She died, alone, of radiation poisoning,

her last words, "I want to be left in peace."

Ten years on, the polonium she named for vanished Poland  
set off the Nagasaki bomb.

Her ashes are enshrined in the Grand Pantheon  
beside the crypts of Zola and Voltaire—

Mme. Curie, *née* Maria Salomea Sklowdowska,  
her books and journals packed in crates of lead,  
not safe to touch for 16,000 years.

## The *Bounty* Women

“From Tahiti’s ‘discovery’ to the *Bounty* mutiny, the ‘island girl’ was a seductive icon—one often neglected or suppressed in the historical record.”  
—M. Sturma, *Western Fantasy & Sexual Politics in the South Pacific*

How little we think of them: bare-breasted  
cargo, grass skirts on agitating hips,  
exotic fauna from the torrid zone, dazzling  
but indistinct: a squall of parakeets, neon  
fish in swollen nets. No sense. No sensibility.  
No names we remember. No ear for the sea’s  
melancholy, long withdrawing roar. Less noble  
than nubile savages: skin rinsed in ginger  
and coconut milk, crowns of hibiscus, riptide  
eyes, scent of gardenias and sea foam,  
a shark’s tooth space of light between their thighs.

No legend marks their mutiny—the night  
they joined the sailors—no time for farewells—  
Tahiti soon as distant as the Thames.  
No film to plumb their quandary: go or stay,  
love or loyalty. No books eye Christian’s lover  
when she learns he’s gone or dead,  
her forty years of doubt, burning palm fronds,  
burying their daughters, outliving all the men.  
No Gauguin shows her circling Pitcairn’s tideline  
in the rain, a thousand miles from anywhere,  
eyeing the scuttled ship and wondering how  
the aimless waves can break on every shore.

## The Lovely Assistant

It's women's work, young and white,  
a pretty face, with just a trace  
of helplessness, an innocent,  
bewildered air, a clichéd  
victim in distress because  
who can be sure a Las Vegas  
crowd would even care  
if the magician makes  
an Arab cleric disappear?  
Or a side-locked Jew? Who expects  
to hear a grateful, ecstatic cheer  
should he restore from vacant air  
the proud mustachioed sneer  
and tanked-topped, tattooed musculature  
of a black Brazilian teenager?

She's needs to be semi-clad  
in something sparkly and sheer,  
fit, long-legged, busty,  
equipped to misdirect the eye  
from sleights of hand with sights  
of thigh. She must be double  
jointed, capable of lying still  
in a thin wooden coffin  
with her head exposed  
and then, without seeming to move  
a muscle, relocate her toes  
beneath her shoulder blades  
into a claustrophobic space  
an instant before the maestro's toothy,  
yard-wide industrial saw  
chews through her missing waist—

The *Bounty* Women

then instantly unfold herself  
and rise gratefully amazed  
to be unbloodied and intact.

And here she works the act's  
one bit of genuine magic:  
she directs all the applause  
to the idler in the florid cape  
who shouts *abracadabra*  
and waves his wand 12 times a week,  
and in this perfect self-erasure  
she helps the audience believe  
the voyeuristic thrill we took,  
was in the death-defying trick  
and not through some ungodly mix  
of smothered lust or jealous wrath  
to see her slowly cut in half.

## For My Father, Weldon Kees, 1979

Hard to read those lines where I'm erased  
For the sake of your phony, noble childlessness,  
but after your own vanishing act, I traced  
you to Oaxaca. You'd never guess  
that as I watch you on the zocalo  
sitting at your table all alone  
or in the cantina playing that out-of-tune  
piano, I'm writing about myself and Robinson,  
new works to which I sign your name:  
"My Daughter Reflects on Robinson" etc. It's nice.  
to be acknowledged by your dad. You confess  
to much you would have skirted on your own  
in brave dramatic monologues like this.  
I've enjoyed stuffing your mouth with words  
like a ventriloquist's dummy. Perhaps  
I'll publish and disrupt your peace.  
Perhaps I'll kill you first. Murder or suicide?  
Maybe I'll kill us both. Throats cut like the boy in Arkansas.  
Toynbee or forgeries? Rosseau or the knife?  
A dry leaf? Enough. Your style is so easy to fake.  
Let speculations flourish. We're going home.  
I had no father. He wrote this poem.