

MALATHION: Low Human Toxicity

Abridged version of a staged solo performance in progress

Raquel Gutierrez

There is a sound in my chest; it is just a little whistle. Hear it and you will know it is me. Running.

Bell Gardens

United States of America

California

Latitude: 33.96528°N

Longitude: 118.15056°W

Ya-Ya's Pastrami. McCoy's market.

Milkshakes, malts, and egg creams

the Rodgers brothers lived on Marlowe Avenue

welcomed punk rock to the neighborhood

wore dirty sneakers and clean Driftwood patches on their jackets

they are the last remaining

white boys in my neighborhood.

White folks of the post-industry

remnants from Billy Goat Acres

precious aboriginal Okies,

immigrant turned isolationist

bemoan the troublesome labor to find Anglo products

along the corridors

off a southern section of the L.A. River.

Eastern and Florence,

Quetzalcoatl and Zeus.

Divine forces in the fall of small leads us to the dawn of sprawl.

My chillido my whistle

a violent wheeze

erupting from my small, excited frame

struggling to contain a maddening laughter

una risa genial una risa...

que cuando se oye los ojos se llenan de lagrimas.

Seven years old

and the guttural utterance

born in my lungs

an instinctual move

I was done playing.

mira el avion mami, mira que rapido, vuelo tambien mami, vuelo tambien mami,

mirame mirame mami

...chasing planes

that look like stars

higher than any power line.

It was the time of Malathion,

toxic mist, a blanket of sorts over

Southern California.

Repeat offend repeat
poison poison poison,
was I ever really exposed?

I had finished surviving
other hysterias indigenous to our region
night stalking tejano striking
every yellow house next to a freeway.

I lived on a street that was a part of many rows of streets
an industrial part of the city.

Malathion.
The mere utterance of its name
is the experience that takes me
out of my body.

I asked my mother
all she said was:

*If the news was asking us to cover our cars to save the paint from the veneno then
how good could it possibly be for humans?*

Good point, mom. You are doing that thing again where you state the obvious.

Ciudad de Nueva San Salvador

El Salvador

La Libertad

Latitude: 13.6769444°N

Longitude: 89.2797222°W

Santa Rosa, San Miguel, San Salvador, Santa Ana,
one place becomes so many places, each place
is named after saints, so many saints
a place ought to be a holy land,
well, wouldn't you think it?

No, she thinks it's a place left to escape
one sociopath after another,
not the ones in power just yet,
not even the government,
but a man with a bad temper,
knife-wielding habits and a kidnapped son.

After another complicated relationship
with a man on a cross
she reckons
that now was the time,
moving moving moving
with no time to squander.

The children had a custom
of forgetting their mothers,
cutting losses like sugar cane.

I am six years old when
you tell me these stories
after you've practiced your English,
reading chapters from the Bible,
to me and my sister.

You bury yourself in our small lives.
Me encanta tu voz, mami. Me encanta tu voz.

One prayer answered, rarely is the petition ever heard.

Pachuca

Mexico

Hidalgo

Latitude: 20.1166667°N

Longitude: 98.7333333°W

He was a little hustler,
with a taste for pesos,
llevate todo lo que puedas, mija.

It was easy to keep these dreams warm
in empty pockets while selling guajolotes and Chiclets.

Oldest of five
heads for the crops of El Norte,
Wisconsin potatoes, plastics in Chicago, pickles in Texas—

He is not ready to give his life to the North:
Watsonville lettuce and strawberries,
four years he is not getting back.

You got ahead in your line of work
by making a white man my padrino.
Señor Lilly oversaw the water as it fell upon my head.
I never saw him again after you quit your job.
I thought padrinos were always supposed to be in your life
to help you along the way when your real father became absent somehow.

We weren't that kind of family.

East Los Angeles

United States of America

California

Latitude: 34.02389°N

Longitude: 118.17111°W

Valentine's Day, 1971, in a grand central market on 1st and Lorena.

El salon de baile.

The ballroom, third floor of El Mercadito.

When you think about it—it's the most perfect place
for two swinging immigrants to meet.

Sharkskin pencil pants and tres flores;
beehive heaven is her crown
as if threaded with black silk.

This fantasy is going to keep this heart beating,
hard choices necessary
like a metronome
keep us in time.

I came to be one of the many difficult decisions
made by ordinary people named José y María.

Vernon

United States of America

California

Latitude: 34.001213°N

Longitude: 118.210979°W

There was a printing press off Fruitland and Santa Fe.
Time. Newsweek.

Respectable titles, popular periodicals
make the men proud.

Only three Mexican men
that work there
and they stuck together
glued by custom, familiarity.

He does not speak to anyone speaking English.

All the Juans, Miguels, Guillemos

he comes across go by

Johnny, Mike, and Bill.

Pinches pocos different,

make me feel ashamed of myself

the old man tells me, seeming

momentarily sober

when he looks me in the eye.

I know that he is not.

Maywood

United States of America

California

Latitude: 33.987864°N,

Longitude: 118.186553°W

Las cosas que recuerdo.

Union Pacific Southern Railroad was the first indication

of what forever

could look like

in a hobo's journey

mi mochila azul in these train-hopping reveries.

We sat there held hostage in a blue sedan
as each rail car moved in clockwork molasses.

Saint Rose of Lima Parochial School

My stomach aches at the thought of arriving late to Sister Shawn Marie's class.
I lie again about brushing my teeth and
I am fucked because I know that mami
will ask me to breathe in her face.

The railroad tracks ran a long line
through my town your town our town
like they ran across
my hand,
Bell Gardens
Bell
Maywood
Cudahy
Vernon
Huntington Park
Lifelines crisscrossed
a dual economy.
Crisscrossed a river full of water
with questionable potability.

Not fit to drink, but they don't call it Montezuma's revenge here.

The water stains my shirt, but my clothes are still clean.

I am late.

The nun was only twenty-one when she taught us.

Paddles splintered our hands as the phonics splintered our tongues.