

PROSE POEMS

Emma Pérez

University of Arizona

Brown on Brown

Beautifully brown, scorned brown, heckled brown, spotted brown, tortured brown, erased, exterminated brown. Non-existent brown. No such thing as brown. In-between, nepantla, impasse brown. Loving the brown feeling brown. Flood-gates brown. Black ebony Brown. Unwhite, non-white brown. Café con leche, milky brown. Esperanza brown. Bo-Diddly brown. Frida brown. Queerly brown. Trans-ing brown. Whatever brown. Anything but brown even when brown especially if brown. Everywhere eternal brown. Always and forever a race of brown. Stay brown. Don't take my brown. Brown that is black. Black that is brown. White that won't brown. Tempestuous brown. A living brown. A long live brown. Excavated, found brown. Never-ugly brown. Light-skinned, dark-skinned, bleached brown. Color coded brown. Pecking order brown. Colorism brown. Policing, curfew brown. Beat-up brown. Kinda brown. Kind brown. Get it, brown. Get down, brown. Wait and stick around brown. Stand back, brown. Service brown. Invisible, unseen, unheard brown. Disappear brown. Missing brown. Worker brown. Worked-up brown. Brilliantly brown. Cry for your brown. Cry for you, brown. Cry out, Brown.

Technique

We practice technique. Almost planned, our exercise, both of us cleverly skillful, dexterous. Almost passionless precision this unattached, unbridled, entwined pair of bodies pumping (friction) for a brief, hot, sacred, secular, uninterrupted minute. Enough time to savor you, to devour smell, to taste coolness on skin, enough time to know the

body's wish —to want more— and more. Enough time to know I want you to want me like the Four Seasons singing, 'you're just too good to be true' and no I could not take my eyes off of you, but then you saw, you saw my eyes scan, scanning thick hips, brown nipples, every piece, every sexy, sensual smile I swallowed whole. I ate hungrily memorizing gestures. Thrilled when you snuck up behind me, kissed my neck, fondled flesh; shocked, titillated when you cupped my chin. Simple. Easy. Your clarity so easy, I say to you. Again, I whisper burying lips in thick black hair, eager to lick your ear. A receptive ear, an open ear. I beg. Almost beg. Nearly beg. Okay. Request. A formal request. An invitation. Come to my room. We'll fuck. We'll practice at fucking. We'll become familiar. We'll exercise.

Dead End

In the night, we held bodies--flesh wounds visible. Your body's warmth flooding my bed with cinnamon skin so sweet, so delectable, I hunger still for the taste, your taste, the taste never in my mouth. That same night you said, no, no, I can't, no more, and I realized I had come to realize what I had already known, what I had come to suspect, I suspected, I am, after all, suspicious. My suspicions realized, I left. I also say, no, no, I cannot, I will not, no more. Do I miss the body I never tasted, never held, never claimed, our passion shelved? In the morning I left my bed and watched you sleep. Contours of breasts shapely, supple. A skin cool, serene, stoic, darkly cinnamon. A slumbering heat only enticed and did not satisfy, could not satisfy my greed. You wouldn't meet my eyes screaming desire so brimming, so uncommon, you couldn't have stopped, wouldn't have let me go easily. Nor I you. But I have. Let you go. I've let myself go, I've left my own bed, I've asked you, I've commanded, don't come back, and flee to my habitual dead end with impenetrable barriers. Firm concrete walls at the end of the end. This dead, dead end.

A Burning Bed

You burned a hole in my bed. With and without you I've burned. Bed burns, abrasions, on skin. Inscribed like tattoos, I'll be your unadorned tattoo, unsigned, scripted symbol. A smile tempting weaknesses, my downfall, likely downfall, anticipated, foreseen, predicted, predictable, dull downfall. Possibly. Probably. Instead, I've burned you like

imprints, raw chards of a heart burnt, crisp, yet constant, as constant as that smile so tempting even as I sleep your smile so constant. Just enough to fool me, or not. Just enough for me to think, to say to myself, I'm out of here, just enough to want the coolness of anonymous sex, precarious and brief, just enough to know that truth is not truth, freedom is imagined, the soul is transient, migratory, eager to leave, eager to go, ready to move across space, non-temporal, non-linear, like my dream last night. Burning a hole in the evening's atmosphere, its breath gasping, burning a hole in what's left of this bed.

THE DOGS ARE BACK

Emma Pérez

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“The dogs are back.”

Obdulia hovers over the kitchen sink and scrubs gristle from a burnt pan. Through the window, she sees a blue sky dappled with saguaros pointing up like sentinels guarding the horizon. A pack of scraggly mutts scamper and toss an object in the air, chasing after it.

“They’re playing with something. Looks dead,” she says.

“Could be a mouse,” says Fred.

Federica goes by Fred. She sits at the breakfast table, sips black coffee and rubs polish on a six-inch blade, spitting on willful spots.

“Smaller than that,” says Obdulia.

“A lizard then.”

Obdulia shakes her head once and stares out the window trellis in a trance.

Fred shoves the knife in a belt leather holster, stands, and pulls open the back door. She skips down three concrete steps and greets the dogs running to her, bouncing and darting. Fred rubs the black stocky one under its chin. The reddish-brown dog flaps its ears eagerly, nudging for a turn. The other three mutts are still flinging the item and the petite chihuahua-whippet catches it with open jaws and chews.

“Give me that,” says Fred.

She bends to pick up the thing and sees a finger, bruised yellow and bumpy. With her shirttail, she cradles the withered extremity and returns to the kitchen, dumping it on the marble counter. Obdulia joins her and they gape for a long minute.

"I'll call Remy," says Fred.

"Of course, you will."

"Seriously, Duli?"

Obdulia shrugs her shoulders and examines the dried digit on her kitchen counter. She pokes it with a fork, turning the piece over.

"Look at this," she says. "A tattoo. Faded but still. Could be a tattoo. Your Remy will love this."

"Let me see." Fred bends down to inspect it closely. "It's probably a cut. Or the dogs' bite marks."

"Look closer." Obdulia sighs loudly and paces back, pushing Fred's head down. "This here."

"Stop it." Fred rubs her shoulder.

"Do you see it now?"

"See what? I don't know what I'm looking for."

"Por favor, Federica. Mira!"

Obdulia grazes the yellowed brown flesh with a fork aiming at the faded design. "Oh. Wow. Okay. Looks like infinity."

"Or an eight."

"Yeah. Or an eight." Fred pauses. "I'll go call Remy."

"Remy's an amateur."

Obdulia lifts a chili-stained apron over her head and hangs it on a doorknob. From the closet, she snatches a wide-brimmed straw hat and a wax canvas backpack that she stuffs with an apple and almonds. A stainless-steel water bottle is filled to the brim, and she crams it into the side mesh pocket.

"Grab your hat," says Obdulia.

"Not after last time."

"Last time?"

"The police weren't happy."

"Fuck them. And ICE."

"At least let me call Remy."

"Fine. Call Remy."

Obdulia opens the kitchen junk drawer and pulls out a sandwich bag handing it to Fred, who rolls the shriveled digit into the plastic and tosses it back on the counter.

"Put it in the fridge," says Obdulia.

"Not with my food I won't."

"Fine."

Obdulia rushes from the kitchen into morning heat. It's barely 9:00 A.M. and the sun already blisters the skin. Cicadas hum in unison. A white-striped mourning dove nests in the eaves by the back door and eyes her when she lingers to stare. The cooing soothes Obdulia most mornings but not today. Already, she anticipates the horror of whatever might be in a desert that leads brown folks through corridors insuring nothing but more hell. She follows the pathway through the shrubs of ragweed and cholla and admires ocotillo sprouting green buds. The elongated branches resemble a long-haired Medusa scaling the sky. Maybe an omen of hope. Maybe the finger got bitten off and the proprietor survived. Maybe there's not another death in the desert today. She hears Fred traipsing behind her.

"Hold up, Duli."

Obdulia stops and turns to look at Federica.

"Well?" says Obdulia.

"Well what?"

"Remy?"

"She says to leave it. They're sending a task force."

"Tucson's finest? When?"

"She's not sure. By the end of the week."

"Great."

Obdulia strides faster through prickly shrubs. Her beige long pants protect her from the pokes and stabs of barrel cacti and furry, teddy-bear cholla.

"Wait! Would you please wait?"

"Well fucking hurry up, Fred. Not like I'm stopping you."

Obdulia relaxes her speed and Fred catches up. They straggle through bushes as Fred drives her oak walking stick, probing and launching a footpath.

"I don't know why you get so pissed at me," says Fred.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yeah, right."

Obdulia shoves her body in front of Fred and breathes into the crevice of her neck, glaring, attempting to put Fred on alert but Fred glares back and breathes warm air on her face. They crack smiles.

"You think you're so damn tough, Duli."

"Here's a surprise, you know I'm so damn tough. That's why you're with me and not that fashion cop."

“Fashion cop?”

“You’ve never heard that before?”

“Nope.”

“I made it up.”

“And what the fuck is it supposed to mean?”

“Oh, please. Isn’t it obvious?”

“She’s a good cop, Duli.”

“So say you.”

They continue rambling through desert cholla that sheds clusters of brown spikes on the beige folds of their pants. They both wear khakis and while Fred’s have a vertical line ironed down the middle of each leg, Obdulia’s are wrinkled and soiled with bacon grease and buttered toast.

Obdulia breaks and points toward something in the distance but when she studies the entity, she recognizes the mirage is nothing more than a Saguaro with a budding head like a child’s pressing against the back of a woman or man trekking through the wilds. It’s deceiving. She looks intently at the towering plant because it appears statuesque and buoyant. A parent hikes with their child strapped securely on their back, fully fed, and curiously observing plants and bugs. But it’s only a mirage. She has to check herself from imagining things she wants to see. Brown people crossing borders from south to north are not hiking leisurely. They run from bloody carnage escaping lies and history. They want a miracle. We all do, she thinks.

Fred passes her and stands on an incline. She waves at Obdulia to join.

“Down there,” says Fred.

“What is it?”

“Not sure. Another body part?”

“Damn. Well, let’s go see.”

“We can’t disturb the crime scene.”

“Ay Federica. Siempre lo mismo.”

“Leave it. For now, Duli. Please.”

“Fuck you, Fred. I’m gonna go see.”

Obdulia slides downhill over clumps of dirt freeing rocks and pebbles. She skids bursting dust on her shoes and pants and as she lands at the bottom of the peak, she stumbles trying to avoid landing on a fleshy mass and gains her balance. Jornada de Muerte, she thinks.

She'd seen the signposts on her drive from Tucson to Albuquerque. Not far from here but close enough. Mostly through New Mexico and the flats of the Texas panhandle. The journey of death is mottled with buried skeletons of settlers who trekked from east to west unaware or just plain stupid. Only local tribes and their merged families steered the terrain with ease. Thing is, the route doesn't reach south into the Sonoran desert. Still, Obdulia imagines the brown bodies who risk a death journey for something else. Hope, she guesses. Some brand of hope must make the trip worthwhile or maybe they aren't hopeful at all fully aware they'll probably dry up in the hot sun. Each in-breath feeling like suffocation.

She stands over a dead brown rabbit. It's squishy with a round little belly. Could have died of heat exhaustion or maybe it fell from above, hiding from a predator and hit its tiny head on a boulder. Hard to say.

"Anything?" Fred yells.

Obdulia digs a tiny grave with a sharp rock, pushes the rabbit inside with the toe of her shoe and shoves sandy dirt on the creature. She picks up two twigs, threading a thin shred of bark through the middle of the crossed limbs, ties them and plants the make-shift cross on top of the grave.

Fred watches from above and waits for a response.

"Hey, should I join you?"

Obdulia looks up, her hand a brim shading her eyes, then ambles down a path farther into sweltering air. She gazes at the sky and sees the sun overhead. Must be noon, she thinks.

"There's nothing out here, Duli."

But she continues moving away from the voice.

"Time to turn back. Come on. You'll get heat-stroke."

Fred wouldn't let her forget the time she ventured into the scorching landscape, forging ahead as she was prone to do. They'd been hiking at Organ Pipe National Monument and out of nowhere, she tripped on skeletal remnants. At first, she thought she had discovered an animal, a deer or javelina. All she saw were loose bones, dazzling white under golden sun. The blinding white arched shapes caught her attention. A rib? A hip bone? With her walking stick, she flipped the pieces aside and noticed a buried tip of a rounded ball the size of a melon. Quickly, she dug out a skull, small and smooth.

A cracked line could be traced across the left side to the temple. She had not forgotten how she felt, what she thought, the way she fainted. Remy had been with them and took over the “crime scene” rebuking Obdulia for having disturbed the remains. As if it mattered. As if anyone cared.

That they had discovered fragments of a young woman had angered Obdulia and the anger steeped inside her not letting her rest. It was too much to be so close to the bones and spirit of someone now lost to their lover or child or parent. And it didn’t help that Remy lectured her with statistics about desert deaths.

“In Pima County alone, there’ve been more than four hundred women over the last four decades who’ve died of heat exposure, or some undetermined way. Blunt force injury too.” Remy pointed to the crack on the skull. “About half of those, some two hundred or more, just skeletal remains. Unidentified. Sad, really.”

Remy flitted above the bones that Obdulia had found and spoke so assuredly, so authoritatively that she wanted to sock the model cop in the face. Instead, she fainted.

She glances up to see Federica waving and shouting something incomprehensible, which only makes Obdulia want to hazard farther into the heat. She wants to ignore Fred but decides to turn back and begins to climb up the hill, her cheeks red and seething.

“You look parched,” says Fred.

“I am parched.”

Fred places a water bottle at Obdulia’s lips. She sips slowly, removes her hat, and wipes her forehead with the back of her hand.

“Let’s go back,” says Fred.

Obdulia marches ahead, picking up the pace once again leaving Fred behind. She needs to be alone. Without Fred’s constant grilling.

“What do you want for dinner?” asks Fred.

“It’s too early for dinner.”

“I know. Just thought I’d make a run to the market.”

“Fine.”

“Look, we’ll come back out tomorrow. I mean if you want.”

“No point. Maybe your Remy will find something. That is, if her task force ever shows up.”

“What have you got against her anyway?”

“Nothing. Not a thing.”

Obdulia sprints now eager to get home, longing to avoid more conversation. She's not sure why she's so enraged. She's not sure why Federica has such a calm demeanor. She doesn't know what to do anymore, how to do it, whatever it is she should be doing. It's as if the world is turned relentlessly upside down, so far from human kindness that all she can do is fume from the fucked-up world around her. She senses Federica near her.

"It's going to be okay, Duli. I promise."

"Would you do me a favor?"

"Of course. Anything. I'll do anything you want."

"Then, please, please shut the fuck up, Fred."

Fred drops back and when they arrive in their back yard, she picks up a red ball and tosses it in the air. The dogs scamper and fight for the toy.

Obdulia opens the back door and screams, not loud, but a scream more like a grunt.

"I'm so tired," she whispers. Crouching on the floor, she clutches the plastic bag she'd left on the counter. Only remnants of brown sand tumble in the shredded sack.