



Man o'

War

Alexis Orjera

Man o' War

Man of War

Alexis Orgera

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the editors of the following journals for first publishing some of the poems in this chapbook:

“Marriage at Cana” *Bat City Review*

"Confession" *storySouth*

“Other and Other” and “Confessions on the Grass Behind the Library,” *Tusculum Review Online*

“Q&A w/Alexis Orgera” originally appeared at *The Volta*.

Cover painting by Ben Sims, “The Body Politic No. 3”

Layout & design by Nate Pritts

THE BELLES-LETTRES OF TETRIS

Not so tightly wound
as you think, old thin man.
Playing your green hand-held
video monster. I'll just sit here
until you see me, odd ball. Ink stain
on my thumb nail. Give me twenty
bucks and I'll return your Gameboy.
I bought a camera
but it sounds like a dying animal.
I won't touch the thing, beefcake.
Wrote a book, but it never followed
on the prairie. There were three cows
and a squirrel sitting on the ledge.
This is not the beginning
of a joke. This is real, true,
unquenchable need
to write everything down. As if I could
see, poker face. If you'd stop the game
long enough to see me,
you'd see me. Here. Moving my fingers.
You'd see my farmer-self.
But all those little blocks have to fit
into the other little blocks
and they have to form a line
and disappear. Like writing
on the moon. It's a good thing
I'm a walker, joe.

THINGS I'VE LOST

Just over there in that bowl of ice
I lost twenty years of my life.
Lost my electrical power
in the soap dish. My twilight music
and two pounds of leather
in the grass behind your ears. I lost
the contents of my stomach—wasting away
like a popsicle in this heat. And then the sky
is a trashcan of losing. What I'm saying is
I'm no perverted Roman soldier
laughing at the foot of the cross.
Planes line up at Kennedy, sturdy,
shiny vessels of the mostly faithful. A woman
beside me fondles her wooden rosary.
I can count: we are 11 in line for takeoff.
11, the sign of Doric muscle,
of parallel stories, of hippie well-
wishers. There is something about language
I don't understand: if the world ends
tomorrow, will it be all my fault
for treating you this way?
Will my juxtapositions extinct the captive
hammerhead and her one virgin birth
in a tank in Omaha? To make sense
out of a thing is to end it. Or to fly.
Think of the two poets on a stage.
One who rages in the face of order
and blazes our skulls, the other who packs
a neat boxed lunch into our laps,
sufficient enough. Atwood said that a word
after a word after a word
is power, but who knows.
In the air, words are displaced pygmies.
Fixation of unfixed towers.
See that? All the little gaskets
on the ground, holding in the stink.

HURRICANE SEASON

Mud is the world.

--Giacomo Leopardi

Three summers duck-dove
 into the Atlantic's waves
as we abducted sand dollars
to bleach to blinding
white in buckets of Clorox

until Hugo bashed the coast one September,
destroyed our collection
churning sand dollars into petrified dreams,

whole forests plowed
by spinoff twisters, homes cleft
clear in half—

*but a nasty hurricane like the one I've seen
isn't meant to wash the world clean.*

Hugo was the most beautiful creature
who dug deep into the mud of our eyes,
choked the sky on its own saliva,
left the coast reeling

in the aftermath. Tell me this Hugo,
famed man o' war,
Caligula of the dead and dying animals,

how can you destroy everything
 purely and squarely
as Christ returned on a pitbull cloud
and not shake loose the bag-the-kill-flutter
of my stymied, kindred heart?

TAKE A HIKE

Once we were a lake
or once a tower when husks of brittlebush
chimed behind us
and a church of dirt rose up to meet us

we were a throw rug Sonoran
the Great Basin with its skyful of prairie dogs
skulls and tessellate glass bottles
braided from Joshua Tree bangs

but the world pulled us from the grasslands
from the banyan's thicket
of conspicuous nodes
from chaparral and coastal sage
and every head hanging down

we were fished from the airwaves
with sandpaper thumbs
where a windstorm blew west
into the valleys and ventricles
of our hearts and yanked us
from our mothers so that we knew
from the very beginning
how tired our feet could get

CAMBRIDGE, COMMON, WINTER

I was on my way out for Twizzlers
braced against the cold
but a dog lay on the icy sidewalk,
near dead. Now my gloved hand,
then my head rests
on the dog's fur as I breathe for her.

The dog's dying but if I hold the cold air
long enough she might feel it
and think the air her own
even as the most awful part of animal death—
fear glazing the eyes—
takes hold.

The dog smells like salon shampoo.
Somebody loved her,
still does even as the words
I love you
become a dying animal
evaporating into common winter air.

CONFESSION

I stole her diary.

It was me.

It was the day she died.

In the clay heat I hung
at the eyebrow

of the funerary jungle

below the burial-

song line,

I hung there

until too many of you

were playing cards

or eating ham.

In my tinny voice

I said *Come here*.

In its black box skin

it strove for my hand.

Fat hours. Deleted

sentences.

Tiny light bulb

the lamp store

won't miss.

CONFESSIONS ON THE GRASS BEHIND THE LIBRARY

Ants are happy little communists
schlepping through plastic spines of Bermuda grass
humping their packs like Quasimodos
of the sandhills.

When I was ten
my parents bought me a chemistry set.
I was afraid of my own shadow in those days,
afraid of the black keys on the Wurlitzer,
but chemistry was good for retaliation
for blowing things up
for getting a reaction from the dead heat
of a Carolina summer.

108 degrees in the shade.
I was a fry-brained slimy child of the pines
and the beaker of grinning sulfur
the hand of god.

When there is nothing left to do,
it's been proven
you destroy, so I poured a test tube's fizzy
yellow mess into the anthill's eye.

I didn't read the alchemy of it
or play any radio waves.

All those little soldiers came bubbling out
like perforated souls
who never could trust me again.

HEARTS OF DARKNESS

The Intracoastal floods like an Orinoco.
Open, then close.
Holes in the skull map a thousand capillaries
along the lifelines of this story.

Enter me Exit here
but don't leave yet—
I have some good air left in my lungs.

In the wading
we've dreamed of separately
as trembling doppelgangers
Spanish moss rings the fingers
of the live oak.

We become the misplaced ligaments
torn from black trunks.
Nothing ever happens
that we can't unimagine.

What this story is *not* is the dark cavern
of the water-moccasin's mouth,
the cottonmouth's dread eyeballs.

And *is*: two devils stalk the woods together,
a Virgil and a vagabond,
ever-searching for the sparkling vision,
the shock of seeing the word made flesh.

MARRIAGE AT CANA

Purely by chance we found each other
in the rubble of crumbling suburban crusts.

Somewhere between the pies and cakes
you're still expected to bake,

the yolk-wash of everything had cracked.
One minute I was boiling chickens

for my own lonely meal,
and the next, peeling layers from my heart

to feed you. I was a hoagie,
your fingers my snaky reliquaries.

A child of the streets, I ran from you twice
and the depths flailed like salmon

split in half lengthwise and stuffed
with choke. Everything cracked.

My hardboiled, drummer-boy head.
My membership to the lily-livered club.

When finally I returned to the oven of you,
unable to eat or drink otherwise, you said,

The world is a beaker of watery wine, love.
And I bubbled

like pot pie, losing heat from my center.
Look at us now sitting at the café, sipping

chardonnay as the world eats our crumbs,
salt-shakers bruising our knee caps,

you reading your parables,
powdered sugar dusting your chin.

OTHER AND OTHER

To each other buzzing softly: Other
and Other.

Clearing in the trees
light coming down like teeth
pine needles to hide in
that itch your skin,
itch your freckly skin,
a dead bat in the breezeway
and the cat's full of ecstasy

I am home from the hospital
where nurses asked my name
over and over attaching nodes
to my skin like clinging cicada shells.

Do I have anything but stories to tell?

I ate my own silly black heart twice
in a summer—

First time discovered we lived
on a burial ground
and that explained the beads jangling
second time we were children destined
to sleep on the brick floor
outside our parents' bedroom
too afraid to sleep alone—
us and our mounds of dirt
us and our bones laid out.

IN THE GREAT TRADITION OF HIGHWAY ANGELS

Out on I-5 we found our stride, the angel and I,
the night we imbibed

the highway's gravy-thick fog and saw in the roadside tumbleweed
sprawling bison and herding anemones,
perforations in the long drive home.

South of Modesto all four lanes merged to a double-helix,
cars fighting upstream through the mazed intestines of the night—

In our delirium the passing cars morphed to diaphanous mastodon hitchhikers.
I knew they weren't real, not my reflections
but tricks of the night-mind or the hopeful-mind—
somehow in his excitement the angel inhabited our visions:

He of the hopeless sloth,
roseate spoonbill, Napoleon wrasse sliding running swimming past.

He of the shark's belly.

A gaggle of buffed stones on a windy beach, the dog-eared deck of cards
an old salt shuffles. A fresh-caught bucket of sand dollars,
sailor on horseback, tattoo webbing a Maori face—

If you want, if you want, he sang to me—next to me—in the lowest,
sweetest voice I'd ever heard. I became drunk
in a dream of spurning the city for a higher calling.
And then, like that, just like that, before I heard what could be mine
along that ribbon-stretch of road, the angel disappeared.

A First Book Q&A with Alexis Orgera re: HOW LIKE FOREIGN OBJECTS

1. *Does your manuscript bear any relation to a graduate thesis project?*

Not really. My graduate thesis was called *A Map of Earth*; both thesis and *How Life Foreign Objects* look at landscape and travel as modes of self-discovery, but that's not very unique to me. A few poems from the grad thesis made it into the first book, but there were 10 or so years between grad school and *HLFO*. I've changed a lot, grown as a thinker and writer—and I've revised things into oblivion sometimes.

2. *How do you feel about these poems now that they've materialized in book format?*

I like them! I think, as a whole, the book paints a kind of narrative that's very true to my experience. I like reading the poems out loud, though I do feel twinges of longing to get on to the next thing.

3. *What was your experience when you began publishing? What challenges did you encounter?*

Probably like most young poets, I had no effing clue what I was doing. Actually, I still don't really. I never know when I send out a packet who's going to like it and who isn't. I send poems out 1. sporadically, 2. indiscriminately, or 3. by editor request. Back in the beginning, sending out one packet or one manuscript was scary; it was end-all-be-all kind of scary. And the rejections were crushing. If you keep at it, though, it's more like brushing your teeth.

4. *How, if at all, did chapbooks prepare you for the making of a full-length collection?*

Chapbooks are a great way to think about the shape of a manuscript without it getting too unwieldy. My first chap, *Illuminatrix*, was sort of all about these characters called Illuminators. The narrative structured itself based on the pre-existing framework. Plus, I was in a manic frenzy when I wrote the thing, so all of the poems were similar in that way.

My second chap, *Dear Friends, The Birds Were Wonderful!*, is a road-trip prose poem book. Again, it had its trajectory built in by virtue of its subject matter.

Working with editors (Matt Hart of Forklift and Justin Runge of Blue Hour Press) on these chaps really prepped me for a larger project. Let me tell you, both of those guys are fabulous to work with.

5. *How did you shape and order your manuscript?*

Well, if I'm being honest here, Matt Hart and Nate Pritts (H_ngm_n) both shaped and ordered the manuscript way more than I did. After Forklift published my first chap, I knew that Matt was a great reader and editor, so I sent him two manuscripts. He actually organized them into one manuscript, which I sent out to reading series and contests. Nate and crew picked up the book during the H_ngm_n Bks Open Reading Period. I'd never worked with Nate before, but we had an awesome in-person marathon editorial session once H_ngm_n Bks had accepted the manuscript for publication. We left the original structure, but added and subtracted some poems here and there.

Basically, in subsequent manuscripts, I do all of my ordering by felt narrative structure, echoes, and conversations between poems. In *How Life Foreign Objects* I think the overall "feeling" is one of the demise of both a relationship and former self.

There's no formula. As you can see, I have found some editors whom I really trust. I have other trusted readers, too. Rick Bursky, Joseph Wood.

6. *Was anyone or anything indispensable in the process of making your debut collection?*

See above.

7. *What is your impression of book contests?*

My impression is that book contests exist to keep publishers afloat, and we need good publishers to publish our work. Without contests, where would they make a substantial portion of their income? It's not like any of these people/institutions are getting rich off of our poems.

Do I think it's sometimes a racket? Sure! I know of many instances in which winners are obviously connected to judges in some significant way. It annoys me, but I generally have an idealism about the best work winning out in the end.

A few of my manuscripts have been finalists or semi-finalists in contests. That's actually a nice measure of whether what you've put together is readable or not!

8. *How did you learn to navigate the press world?*

You mean when *will* I learn to navigate the press world? You just have to read a lot and find publishers whose choices you admire. And send when you can. I have three more manuscripts just waiting around, and half the time I have no idea where to send them.

9. *What aspirations did you have for this book?*

Duh: National Book Award, Pulitzer Prize, LA Times Book Award. The usual.

10. *How would you describe this work?*

Lyric-narrative-heady-earthy-roaming-static-ecstatic-sometimes funny-musical poems?

11. *Do you work primarily on discrete poems, serially, toward a project, with a set of concerns, or otherwise?*

Usually I'm working with discrete poems, though I'll get hooked on a certain subject matter and write circles around that for a while. Sometimes there are characters, as I've already explained. I'm working on a series about Saint Agatha right now, which is kind of gruesome—she's the saint who had her boobs chopped off b/c she wouldn't sleep with some duke.

I think I do form in chunks. For instance, I have a manuscript of prose poems that I wrote all in one time period. I have these long-lined couplet poems that I was writing for about six months.

12. *Whose poems affect you or your work?*

The poets who have had the biggest effect on me one way or another are Yusef Komunyakaa, AR Ammons, Dean Young, Elizabeth Bishop, Philip Levine, Mark Strand, Gail Mazur. The way I first started reading poetry was in anthology form—that went on for years, so I think it's hard to say. I think I imbibed a ton of different voices, old and new. Right now, though, the thing I'm most focused on/enamored with is repetition, echo, breath, which seems to come directly out of Ammons's "So I Said I Am Ezra" poem from *Ommateum: with Doxology*, his first book.

When I want to read poems out loud, I always go back to Plath for her poems' ferocity, intricacy, and crackling. Then there are too many more contemporary individual books to name—I'm re-reading Mary Ruefle's *Among the Musk Ox People* and Darcie

Dennigan's *Corinna A-Maying the Apocalypse* and reading Albert Goldbarth's *Griffin* at the moment—but I read fairly widely and across genres; I suffer from short attention span syndrome, so it helps to keep things interesting!

13. *What are you working on now?*

I just finished up organizing two manuscripts—I'm proud to say that I organized them all by myself this time!

