

NIGHTS of MEASURE

a burnaway book of poetry

jess

I come to you now in the posture of most of our afternoons together: concerned, talkative, and sitting on a cement curb. I told you at Honky-Tonk Tuesday that you were one of the people I most admired. After a morning of hands-free travel, I am able to tell you why.

I was listening to an article using Siri's read-page function, and she was absolutely demolishing the words. And I remembered how one time I mispronounced a word and you said, "I like that because it means you read, and you're learning new words." Jess, reader, I cried. I think the reason that this motion of yours constricts my heart and flosses my ducts is because I know my own hateful joy in correcting others' pronunciations. I am smiling to myself just thinking about some jumble in a coffee shop *misusing*. At Honky-Tonk Tuesday I told you I admired you most because you're a genius and non-judgmental and have an Inventive Morality and I really mean it not in a bad way. But one really true really is because you let me know what it would be like to be treated with sweetness in the ways that I am harsh. You are so smart that you could be rat trap, but instead you've made your heart into a mouse-sized harp. Who will play your mouse-sized harp when my python comes to measure your goodness by my badness?

I am having difficulty speaking about how puddled and ebullient I feel when you extend sweetness to me where I am unforgiving. But in fact, when you do this to me I feel I can put you on, and this will be the way I survive. When I think of your graciousness, if I were to patch it into my quilt, I could live anywhere.

Another thing Jess—you love goodness so strongly, but I never see you hate people. And as badness is always caused by people, I wonder how you do. I only know this is rare because I am in love with you for it, and I'm in love with basically nobody. Ok really, I'm in love with enough people

to cast a sitcom set in a single house. I wonder to whom on that sitcom would I feel the closest. Do you have that impulse—to have an Only-person? I think this is a common impulse, and that's why people have partners. But it cannot be that fully because partners usually have a component of romance or sexuality and this Onlyness doesn't need that.

This topic reminds me of the time we talked about if you could pay someone to be your friend or not, and I am fully curious to hear what you think. Anyhow, in my cloud-bosom sitcom, we would leave all the men I'm in love with talking in the living room and drink coffee at the breakfast table and discuss the above.

yoona nam

MISPRONOUNCED

nights of measure

The poet who
recites in my head
suspects my accent.

Neither would she
say words like
mispronounced
in a poem.

She kept tripping over it till one day she had me remove it
quietly.

But I haven't entirely.

I've been taking it into my mouth, thinking, *I'd better bring it
back out the same way it went in.*

But not every word is easy to swallow and spit back out,
for instance, my name.

It meant to illuminate, yet not a ring of light,
the hue of jade, yet not round,
look at it and say it,
your jaw would tug it, 윤경, it has elbows and knees
to push and bend

like namul dishes on my mother's
bapsang,
roots and leaves
stringier than water but
can't be softened until I chew at least twenty times
before I swallow.

But see, butter

Say better

Say raw

See rude

Say crude

See red

Say red.

There is too much in Ppalgang,

color, doubled,

blooded.

It doesn't flow--

Brood

Add small drops of milk everyday

Soften

Forgotten

Namul (나물)

Seasoned edible greens and herbs, a dish in Korean food

Bapsang (밥상)

A two letter Korean word for a table on which meals are served (“bap,” rice, bowl of rice, food or meal, and “sang,” image, table, top, or prize)

Ppalgang (빨강)

Red in Korean (the initial doubled consonant “ㅃ” creates an emphatic “pp” sound)

juan
miguel
milagros
olga
manuel

will right now be doing their own thing
where beautiful people sing
and dance and work together

pedro pietri

ataúd abierto para un obituario puertorriqueño

an open casket for a puerto rican obituary

trabajaron con una rosa entre los dientes.
trabajaron en el turno de las tres, cerrando borracheras,
chingando entre cajas.

fumaron. a veces se acusaban de jalar duro. a veces no se
respetaban.

cuando iban a la feria, al otro lado de plaza,
comían nubes maybelline y cerraban los ojos a ciudades frías.

perdían tíos y no hablaban de funerales.
muchas veces se reían cruelmente de la lluvia sucia.
pagaban la renta sin contrato.
era lo único quizás estable, aunque titubeaba el cheque.

coronaban sus bebos con cartón dorado.
sin nadar regularmente reunían humo, baba, carbón y mime.
tenían complejo de limber, inseguridad de candado,
pómulos holsum y merienda tres monjitas.
invadían un hotel que invadía una playa.

aprendían a pasear un centro comercial sin hacer compras,
qué nombre darles a los guardias, qué verjas se abrían sin
alicate.

combinaban arroz chino y tostones.
a cierta hora por los escritorios se escuchaba el celular de abuela.
se prendía la alarma y todo el vecindario se encendía con
ladridos.

anticipaban la venta de la casa.
pintaban las rejas o llamaban a José
y ofrecían sellar el techo.

iban a caminar al parque lineal.
cambiaban la dieta, evitaban los mariscos,
se ponían protector en los nudillos.
preparaban una cena.
mataban cucarachas.
se colaban en el expreso.
se quejaban desde la cola.
mantenían las ventanas abiertas para no gastar el tanque,
fumaban con la boca pegada al filtro y el aire al fuego.
enrolaban los recibos.
martillaban la bocina hasta que el calor sonaba a sol.

descubrían ranas en el parquin.
se sentaban en los bancos de las fuentes yermas y abrían la
cartera.

siempre tenían cambio, siempre, *mala mía*.
se robaban servilletas y el ketchup que cargaban
entre bolígrafos que decían *santander, tu banco*.

paseaban de trajín en turno.
aterrizaban tras los trámites a una noche de trastes

y en Kmart o Cotsco buscaban la ATH de la entrada,
diciéndole al nene, *no toques eso que es caro*.

tenían familia en Yabucoa.
mami estaba muy mayor pa cocinar.
discutían con los hermanos sobre el cuido.
el cheque tardaba y nadie contestaba.

la transportación nueva era un evento, el ferry, la laguna.

avanzaban con el papeleo.
satisfacían la cuota.
balanceaban la chequera.
preparaban los impuestos.
conocían bien las asimetrías de sus parejas.
ayudaban a don paco con la compra.
conversaban en las escaleras del condominio
sobre quiénes se fueron, quiénes volvieron,
lo difícil de vivir aquí y allá.

iban a la iglesia, agradecían a dios.
mantenían una mente abierta y *mira a ésta*.
decapitaban reputaciones.
le mandaban arroz con gandules.
no sabían bien si parar de camino a San Juan.
se aprendían el seguro social,
el código de la oficina,
la combinación de la maleta.
se sentaban a ver televisión y caían dormidos.
miraban las noticias mientras doblaban la tanda.
apagaban el calentador si nadie se bañaba.

aunque siempre llovía a las cuatro,
repetían la rutina de sorpresa, crisis y rescate.

corrían a arrancar pinches, gritando *¡la ropa!*,
 sus manos alzadas, baluartes contra las gotas misiles.
 abrían las palmas en forma de copa. se llenaban de cascada.
 jugaban en las piedras. soltaban la risa resbalosa.
 tomaban los nombres en las bocas. gritaban
¡bájame las llaves! abrían los portones.
 se sentaban en el techo. arreglaban sus camisas.
 se grajeaban y luego no hablaban.
 se morían y luego se morían de la risa.
 se mojaban las caras.
 pedían pon y se daban apodos como
 flaco, gordo, pendejo o cabrón.
donde la gente bella canta
y baila y trabaja junta.

san juan, puerto rico, 2020

for pedro pietri

juan
 miguel
 milagros
 olga
 manuel
 will right now be doing their own thing
 where beautiful people sing
 and dance and work together
 pedro pietri

they worked with a rose between their teeth.
 they worked the three o'clock shift, closed drunken nights,
 fucked between boxes.

they smoked. sometimes they accused each other of hitting it
 too hard. sometimes they acted trash.

when they went to the fair, across from plaza,
 they ate maybelline clouds and closed their eyes on cold cities.

they lost uncles and didn't discuss funerals.
 often, they laughed cruelly at the dirty rain.
 they paid their rent without a contract.
 this, the only maybe stable payment, even if the check
 stammered.

they crowned their bebos with golden cardboard.
 without swimming, they regularly gathered smoke, saliva,
 charcoal and vinegar flies.
 they had a limber complex, a padlock insecurity,

holsum cheekbones and tres monjitas merienda.
they invaded a hotel that invaded a beach.
they learned to cruise a mall without shopping,
which name to give security, which fences opened without
pliers.

they mixed arroz chino and tostones.
at a certain hour through the door screens you could hear
abuela's phone.
the car alarm went off and the whole block lit up with barks.
they anticipated the sale of the house.
they painted the bars or called José
and offered to seal the roof.

they went to walk at the linear park.
they changed their diet, avoided seafood,
wore sunscreen on their knuckles.
they made dinner.
they killed roaches.
they cut to the front on the expressway.
they complained from the tail end of the traffic jam.
they kept the windows open so as not to waste gas.
they smoked with their mouth on the filter and air on the
flame.

they rolled their receipts.
they hammered the car horn until calor sounded like sol,
until heat sounded like sun.

they discovered tadpoles in the parking lot.
they sat on the infertile fountain benches and opened
their purse.

they always had change, always, *my bad*.
they stole napkins and ketchup they carried

between pens that read *santander, your bank*.
they strolled from errand to next in line.
they landed after a full day on a night full of dishes
and in kmart or cotsco they looked for the atm near the
sliding doors,
telling their kid, *don't touch that, it's expensive*.

they had family in yabucoa.
mami was too old to cook.
they argued with their brothers about in-home care.
the check was late and no one answered.

new transportation was an event, the ferry, the lagoon.

the paperwork advanced.
they satisfied the quota.
they balanced the checkbook.
they prepared taxes.
they knew well their partners' asymmetries.
they helped don paco with his groceries.
they spoke on the condominium stairs
about those who left, those who stayed,
the hardships of living here and there.

they went to church, thanked god.
kept an open mind and *look at her*.
they decapitated reputations.
they sent arroz con gandules.
they didn't know if they should stop on the way to san juan.
they memorized their social security,
office code,
luggage combination.
they sat to watch tv and fell asleep.
they saw the news while folding clothes.

they turned off the water heater if no one was showering.
even if it always rained at four,
they repeated this routine: surprise, crisis, and rescue.
they ran to rip off clothespins, screaming *¡la ropa!*,
their hands in the air, strongholds against missile drops.

they opened their palms to form a cup. they filled them
with waterfall.
they played on the rocks. they let loose slippery laughter.
they took names into their mouths. they screamed
¡bájame las llaves! lower the keys in the basket!
they opened gates.
they sat on the roof. they fixed their shirts.
they made out and later sat in silence.
they died and later died laughing.
they splashed their faces.
they asked for a ride and gave each other nicknames like
flaco, gordo, pendejo or cabrón.
*where beautiful people sing
and dance and work together.*

san juan, puerto rico, 2020

kristina kay robinson

MARYAM'S REFRAIN

nights of measure

—in the pre- light at morning
she reads to him:

‘the angels and the Spirit descend therein
by permission of their Lord for every matter.’

It is Her first born
who wants to know
How can you be certain
god is real?

I. heads

Mother said:
Sul-ma saw them come in off the ships.

Passed already through
so many islands, ‘cross so many lines
taken such a long time,’cross the water

Maybe the sea
they come from
more than any place at all.

II. angels

Mother said:
Sul-ma saw so many fall away.
Everyday the losses came in on the waves.

Sul-ma said some come off the ships
walked with many
Turned the horizon grey

In the sky
there were wings.

Sul-ma saw one:
with a thousand faces
all streaming with tears.

Sul-ma saw another and another and another :
she is the only one she told.

Afterward
she hummed:

*sung so many
flung so many
lessons into the water*

*Lessons--
into the water
into the water*

in the water
I am born reborn
in the water

III. palmetto

She deduced:
Sul-ma was the last person
to know how to weave baskets.

IV. Books

Some say a plague
is a conjure

Curse:
you can call it a calamity
of bad action compounded
upon the unlucky.

Sul-ma weaves baskets so tight
no water escapes.

Sul-ma hums
her fingers move:

*On my head is red and gold
red and gold*

*In the black of night
yellow blue the rose at dawn*

Who is there but thee?

Who is there but thee?

*Oh, I am such
a terrifying thing.
a terrifying thing.*

—She searches his face for satisfaction:
‘it is Allah who sends the winds, and they stir the clouds,’
Sun high, He observes the way
the palm creates a shadow
on her face, her eyes a light
cupped hands to catch
the tears

no fooling
Her
First born
Only born
at dawn.

MO COSTELLO is an artist based in Athens, Georgia.

MARGARET JANE JOFFRION lives in Tennessee.

YOON NAM holds a PhD in 16th– and 17th– century British literature, is a DJ and loves records, and also draws and paints. She lives in Atlanta with her husband, a beautiful cat named Reginald, and a new addition to the household, a cat named Spicy.

RAQUEL SALAS RIVERA Poeta, traductor, editor y crítico literario puertorriqueño. En el 2018, fue nombrado Poeta Laureado de la ciudad de Filadelfia por un término de dos años. El año siguiente, se convirtió en el recipiente inaugural de la Beca de Laureado de la Academia de Poetas Americanos y ganó el Premio Nuevas Voces del Festival de la Palabra de Puerto Rico. Cuenta con la publicación de siete plaquetas y cinco poemarios. Su tercer libro, *lo terciario/the tertiary* (2da ed., Noemi Press, 2019), fue semifinalista para el Premio Nacional del Libro del 2018 (EE.UU) y ganó el Premio Literario Lambda a una obra de poesía transgénero del 2018. Su cuarto poemario, *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)*, fue publicado por Birds, LLC en el 2019 y fue un semifinalista para el Pen America Open Book Award del 2020. Su quinto poemario, *x/ex/exis: poemas para la nación/ poems for the nation*, fue el primer ganador del Premio Ambroggio (Editorial Bilingüe/ Bilingual Press, 2020). Recibió su Doctorado en Literatura Comparada y Teoría Literaria de la Universidad de Pensilvania y vive, escribe y enseña en Puerto Rico.

RAQUEL SALAS RIVERA is a Puerto Rican poet, translator, editor, and literary critic. In 2018, he was named the Poet Laureate of Philadelphia for a two-year term. The following year he became the inaugural recipient of the Laureate Fellowship from the Academy of American Poets and won the New Voices Award from Puerto Rico's Festival de la Palabra. He is the author of seven chapbooks and five full-length poetry books. His third book, *lo terciario/the tertiary* (2nd ed., Noemi Press, 2019), was on the 2018 National Book Award Longlist and won the 2018 Lambda Literary Award for Transgender Poetry. His fourth book, *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)*, was published by Birds, LLC in 2019 and was on the 2020 Pen America Open Book Award Longlist. His fifth book, *x/ex/exis: poemas para la nación/ poems for the nation* was the first recipient of the Ambroggio Prize (Editorial Bilingüe/ Bilingual Press, 2020). He received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature and Literary Theory from the University of Pennsylvania and now lives, writes, and teaches in Puerto Rico.

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BURNAWAY