

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY:

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ARACELIS GIRMAY

Slow Lightning: Poems

Eduardo C. Corral

Yale University Press, 2012

96 pages; paperback, \$18.00

Citizen: An American Lyric

Claudia Rankine

Graywolf Press, 2014

160 pages; paperback, \$20.00

Break the Glass

Jean Valentine

Copper Canyon Press, 2010

96 pages; hardcover, \$22.00

***introduction**

For centuries and centuries, mournful, magical, joyful art has been made about changes in the light, and the greater changes the shifting light represents. About the French idiom to describe dusk, Jean Genet writes, "The hour between dog and wolf, that is dusk, when the two can't be distinguished from each other, suggests a lot of other things besides the time of day...The hour in which...every being becomes his own shadow, and thus something other than himself. The hour of metamorphoses, when people half hope, half fear that a dog will become a wolf."¹

¹ Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love* (New York, NY: *The New York Review of Books*, 1986): [pp].

Part of what I am so utterly deepened by in Jean Valentine's *Break the Glass*, Eduardo Corral's *Slow Lightning*, and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* is the way these writers conjure and respond to various dusks and forms of dusking. Here, I will argue that to deal with dusk is to begin to deal with, and think about, what it means to negotiate being a U.S.-American at all. In these "slides," I'd like to think about dusk and the in-between in a decidedly "American" context and landscape. (I use "American" here to point to its/our transnational identities and histories.)

**one*

On the first day of 2009, 22-year-old Oscar Grant is fatally shot at around 2:15am, by 28-year old BART Officer Johannes Mehserle, in a crowded and lit BART station in Oakland, California.

On February 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin is killed by white/Latino George Zimmerman (neighborhood watch coordinator under the protection of Florida state's "Stand Your Ground" statute) between 7:09 p.m. and 7:17 p.m. This day, in Sanford, Florida, sunset is recorded at 6:22 p.m. and civil twilight at 6:46 p.m., leaving twenty-four minutes of dusk. Trayvon Martin is 17, and George Zimmerman is 28.

On September 14, 2013, in Charlotte, North Carolina, just after two a.m., 24-year-old Jonathan Ferrell runs to the nearest house for help after surviving a car accident. The white woman who answers the door, thinking it is her husband, sees Ferrell and immediately calls 911, claiming that a black man is trying to break in. On the 911 tape recording, the woman can be heard crying, "I don't know what to do...I can't believe I opened the door... Please don't let him get my baby." Unaided by the woman, Ferrell leaves the house and continues to look for help. When three officers arrive at the scene, they see Ferrell who runs toward them. They are here to help, aren't they!? He is fatally shot ten times by 28-year-old white police officer Randall Kerrick who fired twelve shots at the unarmed Ferrell.

August 9, 2014, minutes after noon in Ferguson, Missouri, 18-year-old Mike Brown is killed by 28-year-old white police officer, Darren Wilson. Brown is shot at least six times, twice in the head.

As this short list suggests, young black men can be, and are, killed by white violence at all hours of the day and night, all across

the country. In broad daylight, in the night, in the wee hours of the morning. The dusk I am thinking about is less about the light and more about a violently white lens that sees black people, often, through the dusky lens—lengthening our shadows, sharpening our teeth. I am also thinking about the dusk of law and of power. The dusk of a justice system that is translated, nearly always, in the favor of white bodies and to the detriment of black and brown ones. Even the ages of the men above help to raise a new set of questions in the documenter: Depending on race, at what age(s) do we “inherit” either our criminalization or our perceived right to police others? What are the trappings of a system that attributes a threatening power to young black men early in their years while simultaneously bestowing legal lethal power to young white men? How does our country turn its boys into “men”? Imagining the black ones as criminals and bestowing their white counterparts with power and guns? All of them young.

**two / “dusks”*

The English word “dusk” comes to us from “dosk” (circa 1200), “obscure, to become dark,” and is recorded as a color word originally. “Dusk” as twilight is recorded only from the 1600s on.

The Spanish “crepúsculo” comes from the Latin “crepusculum” (a word we also inherit in English), which comes from “creper” (dusky, dark and uncertain, doubtful, obscure).

**three*

Early May, 2014. I arrive in Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala, India, to participate in a celebration of the life of the poet Jack Agüeros. It is just after three a.m. when I land, and the early morning air is black and dense with bus exhaust and taxis and the electric and iodine-yellow buzz of the florescent lights above us as my kind host, C. V., and I move through the crowd to find our car—hundreds of people arriving and awaiting their arrivals.

I am told by C. V. that the journey to the hotel will take over an hour. Black night all around us. Moments of tremendous rain. As we ride, C. V. and I in the back, I try to see outside of the window—and cannot—except for the occasional outline or blur of something—one

darkness subtly distinguished from another—when a car flashes its light on the side of the road or when a truck nears us going in the opposite direction.

These moments of light make C. V. both more and less visible, sometimes a shadow or a fragment—his body reduced, by darkness, to a subtly shimmering eye, nose, cheek, and half of mouth. Sometimes he seems “whole,” and other times he appears in pieces. C. V., are you disappearing? Or being born?

My host and I, we speak in stops and starts. I don’t speak Malayalam, and the English he speaks is accented in a way still new to me, and so we find ourselves rephrasing questions and answers so that the other can understand. My attachment to my English, somehow, abandoned or loosened—and with that, a different and sparse sense of self emerges. Our conversation its own set of bursts and flashes. Comprehension is impressionistic more than anything. And I am at home, quite quickly, in that feeling of being quite lost but cared for—or accounted for—in a vessel, moving.

The bedazzlements of these moments of seeing and understanding have just as much to do with the bursts of light as they do with the blackness we move through. And for me, this feeling is similar to the feeling of writing a poem. Reading a poem. Like the journey on the road from Trivandrum to Valkala, the dusk is full of mystery and light. Clarity is slant, obscured, knowledge bent. Subjects are diffused and shifting shape. Depending on the context within which we experience this dusking, I am at home in the possibility of such dusk, or I am terrified and hunted inside it.

**four / border + dusk*

The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture.

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line.... A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.²

² Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 25.

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Eduardo C. Corral's first book, *Slow Lightning*, is organized into three sections of poems, many of which are ekphrastic and/or poems that invite readers to consider the sculptural qualities of text, or text (language) as image, as painting, as construction. For example, in his "Poem after Frida Kahlo's Painting *The Broken Column*," readers must turn the book sideways in order to read the poem, physicalizing a shift in our engagement with the object of the book and with the "image" of the poem. The poem is broken up into twelve sections, some of them longer and some of them short bursts of texts:

6

Ladies and Gentlemen once again I would like to begin with the wound.

—Joseph Beuys

7

Diego sleeps!
Green sheets pulled down to his waist.
A fly lands on his left eyelid,
and for a moment

it looks like one eye is open.
A monkey jumps
onto the bed, begins to lick the sweat
in the hollow of his chest. (26)

This movement from shorter to longer stanzaic and linear breath echoes the Kahlo painting itself: an ionic column, where a spine would have been, running down the center of her naked and wounded torso. The column remains vertical but is broken into chunks of varying widths. She is pierced, all over, by nails. Some of them large, many of them smaller, and nine bright tears fall out of her otherwise staring (at us) eyes. A poem such as Corral's asks the reader to use the poem as a window into seeing the painting, but also the painting becomes a window into seeing the poem. While some moments ("Her hands / clutching the linen / draping the lower half / of her body, her fingers lost in its pleats" (28)) seem literal translations of the painting, other moments between painting and poem are gorgeously and surprisingly associative (the mention of "cold hair cascading toward