

INTRODUCING THE *SRPR* ILLINOIS POET:  
EDGAR GARCIA



*Photo by Alexis Chema*

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Edgar Garcia is a poet and scholar of the hemispheric cultures of the Americas. He is the author of *Skins of Columbus: A Dream Ethnography* (Fence Books, 2019); *Signs of the Americas: A Poetics of Pictography, Hieroglyphs, and Khipu* (University of Chicago Press, 2020); and *Emergency: Reading the Popol Vuh in a Time of Crisis* (University of Chicago Press, 2022); among other works and collaborations. He is associate professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Chicago, where he also teaches in the department of Creative Writing. In 2022–23 he is the visiting editor of *Fence*.

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**from *Cantares***

Last night I dreamt that I was employed as a suicide prevention specialist in ancient Mesoamerica. We had no phones then so no hotline to call or anything like that. I held these gatherings going place to place for people to tell me their stories and songs and stories and songs about others. If anything seemed amiss with someone's emotional ideation we would bring them into crafts therapy of various kinds, employing them meaningfully. Sometimes I would bring them to help me with my work. In my dream depression, anxiety, and suicide were pervasive in the gritty and unforgiving world of ancient times. I stayed so busy with my job. I knew it was a dream because in a few hours I saw Claude Lévi-Strauss in his hotel room in Brazil anxious about having to go out and do actual fieldwork in the Amazon and just hating it. He hated that he would have to go out there in the discomfort of all that; he just wanted to stay in his hotel room—smoke, write, sleep—and say he went out. Then I could see that he was writing to his mother. He seemed so full of familiar human folly. I wanted to take him with me to help me with my work. I kept saying to myself, “so human, all too human.”

## XVII.

Some people say  
Fathers matter  
For the blood they relay  
Into daughters and sons.  
Repetition  
By way of the latter.

The ones who deny  
Inherited mind  
Often rely  
On a kind of pretense.  
Difference  
Implied not defined.

But I'm different from him  
    —I'm a poet  
    —my own man  
    —no synonym.  
But doesn't it matter  
What that man reformed  
When he gave  
His father to your form?

Thus does life spin  
Like a pinwheel unhinged;  
    Happily,  
Stupidly, impinged.

At least I have friends!  
I call them my kin  
Who like a stone

[NB: Here I must describe the scene  
Of the poem in which I,  
Tecayehuatzin

surround obsidian,  
Jade, or emerald  
Into convivium.

They come arrayed  
With flowering colors sprayed  
    To traipse  
And offer praise.

    My fame?  
It's like the plumed ways  
Of maize or bellbirds—  
Always a bit depressed.

Thus does life spin  
Like a pinwheel unhinged;  
    Happily,  
Stupidly, impinged.

I suppose you'll ask, then,  
Doesn't it make sense  
To appreciate whence  
You've come, the lifepath,  
The string of fires  
That light the present flame?

I could laugh—but I'll say,  
Instead, truly—

I don't care for any of that.  
Why should a rotted flower  
Bother with its past?  
How would ruination  
Let anyone say anything  
Other than—alas? Alas!

Gathered my friends like moisture  
To discuss why people versify,  
    Why they sing,  
    And if such things  
Give special key to deeper authenticity.  
It happened here, long ago,  
    In Huexotzinco—  
Or, no, have they told you that  
Because I'm from Huexotzinco  
I'm some kind of untrustworthy beccafico,  
chirping from both sides of my yap?  
Do you so easily tip your hat  
To propagandistic claptrap—  
To *Mexica* pronunciamentos?  
I'm sorry; I have to laugh at that.  
It's just so cinquecento.  
You have to understand that back then,  
Though independent,  
Our homes sat between the Mexica  
    and their enemies, the Tlaxcalans,  
so we all had to sneak as do politicians,  
    sly as magpies  
and slick as the rain  
Between two opposing flames  
Equally barbarous  
And both trying to burn our fields  
Or bring us into their domain,  
Depriving me of my reign  
And destroying all my friends.  
What would you do in that situation?  
Of course we lied. To one side  
    We apologized  
As if our people's intrigues were beyond us  
While, to the other side, we feigned sinuous

That is not my burden  
To pass down to these friends  
Or the children to whom  
                  I've given  
The difficulty of life—  
How I could I give them *that*?

Instead, dear friends,  
Be pleased by this poem—  
Your poet, your friend.  
I seek you time and again  
To bring only garlands  
And poetry light as bones.

We are pinwheels  
And paintings of pinwheels  
                  And nothing  
Else, spinning, impinged.

Wherever I spin, arriving,  
Home is there, awaiting,  
Scattered like a tree  
Whose every leaf and seed  
Swirls down,  
                  Anticipating;  
Living beyond itself  
And the present versifying.

Its life is felt  
Beyond itself because its pain  
Is strained into something else:  
                  Something green  
                  Unseen

Intrigues in which they could confide,  
switching back and forth  
                  To maintain our convoluted course.  
In other words, unlike them,  
I had friends in every manor and demesne,  
such that I was able to gather in my home

                  In conversation  
The greatest poets of my generation  
To discuss what it is about poetry  
That feels particularly  
True or real—

                  a fountain of sincerity  
In a world made of mendacity.  
                  You may know we call poetry  
                  “flower and song”

Not flower and scholarly disquisition.  
My aim was not to inspire argument;  
I wished to hear them sing  
And, in singing, vocalize self-reflection.

                  The first to do so  
Was Ayocuan Cuetzpaltzin  
                  of Tecemachalco  
Who might as well have been  
Quoted in that quasi-Daoist tome  
Compiled by Liu An, King of Huainan—  
                  the *Huainanzi*—  
Reminding us that the fleeting moment,  
The temporality of the poem,  
Is all that has ever been.

                  After him,  
We heard from the psychonaut  
                  Xayacamach  
Of Tizatlan, who used his song  
To tell us of his personal experiences

At times, until the rosy dawn  
Of heavenly sensation  
Makes it green,  
As green as corn, cacao-flower,  
Or the bird from the garden  
Of the humming gods.

Imagine a progenitor  
Severely sick, in need of help—  
But also depressed,  
Delusional, suicidal,  
Selfish, and generally  
Unpleasant and mendacious—  
Can I say it more straight?

Thus does life spin  
Like a pinwheel unhinged;  
Happily,  
Stupidly, impinged.

Amidst all this, who am I  
To soar and be born?  
Who am I to snare  
Ancestors like flowers  
For a garland? Whose fire  
Gives gorgeous heat  
To the beating heart  
Of this hoary speech?

I'm on guard, obviously;  
I'm at war, certainly;  
I bear terrors older than poetry.  
But I bow down anyway.

with the sacred mushroom  
(i.e., teonanacatl, the god-flesh), the faun  
That guides you into shining forests  
where every leaf  
Sparkles in the sensation of poetic speech.  
Then sang the lusty Aquiauhztin  
Of Ayapanco,  
Composer of erotic hymns,  
for whom you go  
Directly into divine influence  
When you give in  
To your sexual appetite.  
He sang with his body (especially his torso)  
Happily, outwardly impertinent.  
Then gloomy Cuauhtencoztli  
Forced his cynicism into musical oratory.  
Then carefree Motenehuatzin  
Sang to turn everyone's attention  
Back to happier, more hopeful themes.  
Then childlike Monencauhtzin,  
A kind of genius in his own way,  
Used his song to declare the necessity  
And naturalness of poetic speech,  
Like warm air on a cloudless day  
To carry the fragrance of flowers far away.  
When it finally came back to me  
To speak, to sing, to reach  
Into my heart  
Amidst the mirrors of their singing,  
and start  
Somehow to conclude the evening,  
All I was thinking  
Was how, thus far,  
Nobody had recognized our commingling,

I keep the drums  
And the greenness of green places,  
The pleasurable hum  
Of water underground.

Gongs, rattles, and rings  
Can't bring me to sing  
Negatively.  
I'm far too far gone.

Everyday I hear the gods  
Descending, their plumes  
Of fire coruscating  
From room to room,  
Like brooms of golden rain.

It is a dream, of course,  
Golden milk corn  
In the summer  
And green corn with its force.

Thus does life spin  
Like a pinwheel unhinged;  
Happily,  
Stupidly, impinged.

Blended together in all our singing,  
Somehow friends  
Though the world outside was even then  
Imploding,  
Goading us to war, bloodshed, more war.  
Though I was still unsure  
We'd got to a satisfying answer  
As to whether and how  
Poetry's truth is here even now,  
I, Tecayehuatzin, was certain  
It had given me these good friends.  
(León-Portilla, *Fifteen*, 200–207,  
214–218, 224–227, and 255–267)]

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