

The Yearning Feed

The Ernest Sandeen Prize in Poetry

Editors

Joyelle McSweeney, Orlando Menes

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2003 *Breeze*, John Latta
2001 *No Messages*, Robert Hahn
1999 *The Green Tuxedo*, Janet Holmes
1997 *True North*, Stephanie Strickland

The

Yearning

Feed

MANUEL PAUL LÓPEZ

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for Mandie Nicole



for my parents, Margaret and Manuel López

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In loving memory of Guadalupe (Mama Lupe) Escalera. You are missed, Grandma.

Like a story

Let me tell you what I saw, listen to me

You must be, you are the beginning of the day

—Bernadette Mayer

THE INTERVIEW

Q: Can you share with us a unique story about your hometown in the Imperial Valley?

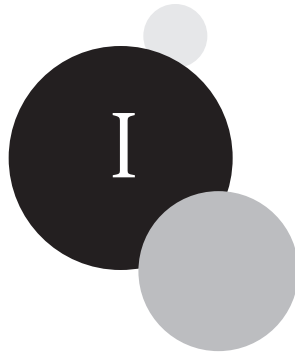
A: I heard a story once about a sheep—it's actually a story about a flock of sheep, but I'll get to that in a minute. This infamous sheep that's now eternally ingrained in Imperial Valley folklore committed suicide one day when it decided to climb a ditch bank near an alfalfa field just outside of El Centro. Long story short, when it reached the top, this rebellious creature that will forever remain nameless, descended the other side without one bit of hesitation. A real chingón, man—stoically, it marched into the abyss as if Charles Bronson had costumed himself in sheep's clothing is what I'm trying to tell you. But it didn't take long before it quickly lost its footing and tumbled into the water, the current, like a crazed washing machine cycle churning and sucking simultaneously, as the borrego left behind a tiny dust storm of hoof and wool kicked up in its wake, limbs splashing feverishly as it raised its little lips toward an orange sky that sizzled above to shout one last declaration in sheep.

(If you've grown up in the Imperial Valley, you know to tread carefully around various waterways because of the vigorous undercurrents that can yank you underwater faster than you can cry "O shit.")

The group left behind stared blankly with eyes like dark, tender buttons; but it didn't take long, you know, before they followed suit, climbing, fatefully reaching that same dire immensity as their beloved comrade.

In ranks, a large flock of woolly sheep drowned themselves by following that first sheep's desire to see what was on the other side; or to sip from that mythical Colorado River water that has quenched the Imperial Valley desert for over a century; or to protest poor labor conditions that have assaulted their backs like electrified machetes; or simply, to cool off, who knows. Maybe it was a vision the sheep had, somehow fulfilling some sort of sheep-derived prophecy in the same deranged tradition as America's most elusive cult leaders. Maybe it was just bad alfalfa that induced a wild hallucination. Maybe they were the sacrificial lambs intent on teaching us something.

I've always been captivated by this story regardless if it's fact or fiction. I prefer not knowing. Though I do wonder why on occasion. Why did that sheep break ranks? And did it know they would all follow?



THE YEARNING FEED

If you were a nanny goat, I'd watch you from afar.
Maybe from behind a hay bale, or a firm stack
of sandbags,

like the ones we used to look for in old war movies.

Nonetheless, my safety would come first.

With binoculars, I'd find your lovely nanny goat lips
and daydream about long, interminable conversations with you.

About the nature of things, nanny goat things

of grass

and the yearning matter that feeds it.

Together we'd fertilize the air with our secrets,

then watch scissors grow.

THE DESERT SERIES

Sometimes I think my tongue is a desert praying for rain!

—Benjamin Alire Sáenz

Carlos's moms used to warn us about staring directly into the growling solesaso: "A desert sun," she said, "shouldn't ever be messed with. That fat ass in the sky will turn on you like a wild turkey in November." With this, she paused, examining her fingernails like a cool-headed Shaolin Kung fu master, slowly, methodically. "Shit, it's kind of like all of us in this Valley," she continued, "our don't-fuck-with-us attitude would have made Miles Davis stutter."

For effect, Carlos's moms balled her hands into two bony fists and shook them in our faces. "The sun's power is raw, mijitos. The thing will bleach your eyes out in a second if it catches you staring without its permission."

"Does that mean we'll go blind," we fired back, afraid of the impending danger, knowing our curiosity would eventually get the best of us—we'd be blinded by twelve!

In response, Carlos's moms glanced from left to right, then shook her fists in our faces again and scowled, revealing her famous, perfect teeth, and her equally famous dimple that winked from the depths of her cheek, an indentation of seduction that broke men like Chicano Kryptonite from the Imperial Valley to Fresno, California.

With our heads down, this might be the reason why we were so damn good at soccer.

During the Imperial Valley summers the chicharras buzzed constantly. Between the chicharras and the perpetual drone of the air-conditioner motors, Hollywood-worthy sound effects spread across our town like a horror movie soundtrack for those who couldn't afford to be indoors.

BANTER IS ALL WE EVER NEEDED (1)

“A güey, let’s just grab some eggs and tortillas so we can make some chilaquiles on this sidewalk it’s-so-damn-hot-out-here-sonofabitch-it’s-so-hot-chingado.”

BANTER IS ALL WE EVER NEEDED (2)

The following was often heard while driving in a Chevy minivan cramped with 11 brown bodies headed for Mexicali's Caliente to place bets on the horse races, most times when those involved should have been in school:

“Hey, turn up the volume on the air conditioner already, dude, it's beginning to smell like carne asada in this ride it's-so-damn-hot-in-here-sonofabitch-it's-so-hot-chingado.”
