

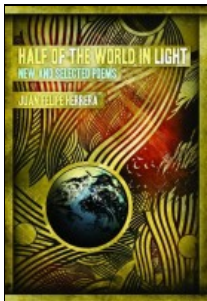
digital emunction

APR 9, 2009

juan felipe herrera's half of the world in light

ROBERT P. BAIRD

[Note: This review is the third in a series. For the first two reviews click [here](#) and [here](#).]



Juan Felipe Herrera, *Half of the World in Light: New and Selected Poems*

In my experience, novel-weight new and selected collections of poetry offer two routes of approach. One is to read them as we read anthologies or journals: as pools of poems we can dip into as our whims inspire or our needs demand. The other is to read straight through, to see what sense we can make of the whole. When we read the first way we read for the poems; when we read the second way, we end up (inevitably, I've found) reading for the poet.

I mention this because I suspect the differences between these two approaches matter more than usual for a book like *Half of the World in Light*, Juan Felipe Herrera's collection of new and selected poems. I can tell you with full confidence that the story of *Half of the World in Light* is a story of Herrera fashioning himself as a self-consciously Chicano poet, and yet that description, accurate as I am convinced it is, will tell you nothing about a poem like "6:01 am," from Herrera's 1996 book *Love After the Riots*:

Write to me. Marga.
The black taxi leaves plainly.
Two men fight the way men fight when
they are clumsy and wonderful. Cowards.
Next car.

I can go to bed now. My brother is away.
I mumble another place, buildings with ragged windows.
Collared shirts, a little boy with a burning cane,
a painting of Hollywood in the forties.
A sports car with fog lights, the wet streets.

This gap between Herrera's poems and what I'll call his poetry does not, I insist, merely demonstrate the hazards of generalization. It's true that Herrera is a terrifically energetic and prolific writer—he has written twenty-four books, along with plays, film scripts, and music—and any neat recapitulation of his career is bound to suffer some exceptions. (Where, for example, to place a poem about Pan Am flight 103?) It's also true, however, that across the three hundred pages of *Half of the World in Light* we can discern a story that is something more and other than the sum of the stories his poems tell: the story of a poet whose Whitmanian ambition pushes him to speak not only about Chicano experience but also for it.

What concerns Herrera most about this experience is the neither-nor quality of Chicano identity, the experience of a people who who feel they lack both a home and a home country. In "Exiles," he brings this quandary into sharp focus: "Where is our exile?" he asks. "Who has taken it?" The theme returns in "Tropical Parrots," from 1994's *Roots of a Thousand Embraces*:

For us
there are no Macro-world. No footing where we can re-
adjust our language and our shape. No enjambments for
our signification. No ready-made molds for our migrant-
shard body, breath. We do not wait to build our
muscularity, our rebel tendon world. Too many have
tried and failed; an old reflex taken from the Master's
theater.

Chicano experience is Herrera's major subject, but as **Stephen Burt** noted in the *Times*, Herrera is "no mere recorder of social conditions." He is a poet, and across four decades he has worked his material in seemingly every style available to the imaginative writer: historical, mythical, personal, political, realist, surreal. Flip to a random page of *Half of the*

World in Light and you're just as likely to find a densely descriptive autobiographical piece like "New York City Angelic"—in which Herrera describes his father as a "shuffler with the right foot draggin', talker, open-cuento style, nonsmoker, Baptist Mexicano English-speaking coat & hat man, white shirt and long johns"—as you are to find a poem like "Möbius," in which the body described could be anyone's and the narrative frame is so far removed as to seem a mirage:

Maybe, here, the body
or appreciation is in the degrees of light, non-line and
texture, especially when the light shaft becomes obscure,
half-lit—when it goes into the sutures behind the gesso of
the cast.

Herrera's stylistic profligacy is matched by a formal restlessness that sees him bouncing from odd crossword constructions to the clipped stanzas that Rae Armantrout favors to unrhymed sonnets to journal-like prose passages. (Not all of his formal adventures are equally successful; I bogged down in longer, more typographically taxing pieces like "Grafik.")

The closest Herrera comes to claiming a form for his own is a poetry of comma-spliced clauses that pile up and pulse like traffic on a Central Valley freeway. Here it is in a poem from 2002's *Notebooks of a Chile Verde Smuggler*:

Lissen to my night, lissen to my dance, my
black feet land on the street pyres of poets and word blower lamps hanging
from their tiny hands, their misshapen podiums. We gather, we frost, we foam
on the corner between rails and concrete, between condos and Plexiglas mini
fashion malls and barber shops colored in Huehuetenango orange stripes
mixed in with lilac.
—From "I, Citlalli 'La Loca' Cienfuegos"

It's hard not to hear a Beat beat here, as the clauses crash forward like a Kerouac sentence or a Ginsberg line—hard, that is, until you listen to the CD that comes with *Half of the World in Light*. (In my head I'd heard Herrera pounding away at the rhythms while a jazz drummer and a whistling audience egged him on; I admit no small disappointment in hearing him read with the calm articulation of a public-radio announcer.)

The trajectories traced by Herrera's poems are so various that it sometimes seems a pair of covers is the only thing holding *Half of the World in Light* together. But the perspective afforded by the collection shows that these orbits all share a common center of gravity. As we progress through the book, the often disjunctive stories told by his poems give way to the singular story of Herrera's own artistic ambition. In a long piece called "Quentino's Journal," he seems to name the guiding impulse of his career:

It's necessary that the voice be spread out equally among all, choral at certain moments and fractured and individual at others. The Journal contains a thousand voices and one at the same time... Will the Journal be an eternal lyric? The voice is darkblue; bearing witness to the constant acceleration of the imprisonment, bearing witness to the growing struggle for its liberation.

No one needs to tell Herrera that a goal as grand as this is bound, at some level, to fail. (In a late poem he writes of "years waging futile wars with poetry until / I could not think of anything else.") The centrifugal energy that threatens to render *Half of the World in Light* a mere miscellany stands as a nice metaphor for the pressure that awaits any poet who would seek to make himself not just a voice but "the voice...a thousand voices and one at the same time." What's more, such an effort, for all its democratic inspiration, entails a basic elitism that brushes hard against the grain of our contemporary egalitarianism.

And yet, and yet. While Herrera's poetic dexterity makes him worth reading, it's precisely the scale of his ambition that makes him compelling. Giving voice to a people is an ancient prerogative of art; to see a contemporary poet take up that charge without embarrassment or apology is nothing short of bracing.

+++

NB: After I finished this review, Herrera was awarded the 2008 NBCC award for poetry for *Half of the World in Light*, an award he shared with August Kleinzahler.

One Response

-  michael robbins
April 9, 2009 (Edit)

Shit, I would've bought whatever publication passed on these just to read this review, which convinced me, while Burt's did not, to take a look at Herrera.

Reply

Leave a Reply