

POEMS

*Juan Carlos Vargas Bolaños**

Botticelli's *Primavera*

Two sets of three women, Cupid's bow and arrows above. Red quivers.
The three Graces dancing a roundel in the spring air. Already home

We search for that which is foreign, wry, abject, morning scents
Of violets and distant woodland paths, the hard-edged scent

Of coriander and sawed wood. The primavera—spring's abandoned embrace
Of winter. Mercury's calm to Zephyr's lust. On the ground,

A black pond lit by flowers, the primavera's tossed gifts in a chamber
Of blue so softly lit that the transparency of the gowns seems gentle

Enough to feel and touch, undisturbed and disturbing. Ovidean blue,
The incessant reminders of youth, the primavera, and the sanction

Of madness. Think of yourself, while the moon fills with winter's
Last snows, as flowers in her perfumed hands, held

There for so long then breaking forth before her eyes, the sudden flight,
Your sweet fall. Think of them with interlaced hands, the scent

Of oranges and pine that must have so easily crossed their paths
As they danced their roundel, the three Graces in gowns of golden rain,

Wet with aromas of chamomile and daisies. Zephyr chasing the nymph Chloris,
Flowers already flowing from her mouth—mouth-and-body-

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Wombed flowers spilling onto Flora's dress to adorn
And fashion the air, and Chloris's frightened gaze unpopulating the world

By one and repopulating us with leaves: The primavera where winter
Sheds its cold beliefs, flowers edge gauze into spring's first cloth, and time

Clocks desire and the body, and whatever is exhausted completes itself,
Whatever is tainted begins anew: Two shoulders bare, lovers moving into

The yet to become, the scent of first nakedness: Spring closing
The white doors of winter, and the stillness

Of these orange trees that seem to hold Cupid up, a blindfolded child
Playing love-and-peek in the leaves. Our wings and arrows

Pointed to this beauty that ends not with love, but with the leaves
And the flowers—supple, dark, ocean of spring's love and lap.

Leonardo's Last Supper

*Christ was to celebrate his last supper,
Among the Dominicans, at Milan.*

Goethe

Like an intent falling. Tempera on wall. Pin-pricks and the star-pour of decay,
Stippled as if by a mad Seurat. Or a villa hidden in the vines. Year after year,

Time's returning pillage, to the paint's districts of color, booty of mosaic
Gold and scarlet, a dreamed language of colors, azurite and acorn-brown,

Amber-grey and malachite, slate-blue haze and crinkled platinum, the ember-glow
Of a numinous gaze, whatever was once there, taken back for ransom, but taken

Back to where? Grove-dark in places, yellow-tinted, the terrible snows of paint falling
Before the pale unpenitence of time. Meaning threaded through the scant colors,

The fragile wandering there in a lost stare, the tapestries gone, St. James barely
Visible, the plates blurring into cloth, the half-ruined flawless hair—art, in its

Mutable plenitude, the cherished beyond the given, on Leonardo's wall: The left wall
Barely visible, the immaculate corded ceiling now nothing more than the ceiling

Of an old house, and the linen stained. His frail fragrant hands outstretched
In the wounds of paint, Christ like a once radiant opulent color straying

Into annulling stillness, or the braille-dark of something lost, a mist-veneered
Paint, the bone-pale and ash-white of a torn fragment or an antiquarian text,

The most lavish of our world's annullings disappearing into the sealing dark.
And in spite of the dark, embalming light of feudal decay, still

The restive shapes—intent, absorbed, demanding, the Pleiadesic plenitude
Of stars upon the night, Leonardo's Apostles in their perfection, fashioned

Out of the bread and wine of his inward profiles, and, still,
The shell-thin paint and once orchid-flame like a summoning void of colors,

The table sloped out to us, and the tympanum crowning Christ, and still,
The aurora-warmth of him, a lush fur of sound, the scent

Of radiance, a rainy morning lifting letting in pale arcs
Of light and blue, behind green and gold curtains of falling rain.

**Paolo Uccello's *Christ Crucified, with Saint John the Baptist,
the Virgin, Saint John The Evangelist, and Saint Francis***

There is in Uccello's *Crucifixion* something remarkably modern,
How the four persons before the crucified Christ seem so isolated

In a world so full of lunar barrenness. How devotion is turned inward,
How solidarity so easily lapses into isolation. They must have even dressed

Themselves for the occasion: St. John at home trying on that
Greenish-blue pleated dress, his hands poised as if in prayer,

Lovely to the sight and touch, and then tugging at his halo first one way
And then another to get it just right. Heavenly fashion. Parisian

Or otherworldly style, via Uccello's Florence, Tuscan airs. She must
Have chosen that black cloak, angora-soft and lustrous, and wrapped it

Just so around her right arm, and made her way there slowly, cautiously,
Her upraised arm reveals the gold lining, and the rouge, pinkish red

Of her dress. The grass behind her mocks her beauty and her reverence—
Dark brown patches engulfing them like flames then leading off

Into the dry hills—and then Christ restores all light, the Cross
Luminous as gold leaf, something polished, something

True, pointed to by the gold lining of her shawl as if she were saying
With her clothes, *See, look, see, this is my son.* And St. John

The Evangelist is dressed in a lush reddish cape, the same color
As Mary's dress, the gold lining of his cape reaching

Through the golden Cross to the gold lining of her shawl,
A trinity of color, and the flow of colors between the two

Soft as silk brocade, embroidered velvet or satin sash. And poor St. Francis,
Looking as if he just arrived, late, bewildered, staring off into space,

And not yet ready to gaze up at the Cross, his habit almost in flight
Behind him—movement where there is no wind or sense. To each his own

Devotion, spread out across a landscape filled with grief—a patchy, barren,
Snowy land but for these four flowers before the Cross, turning and twisting

Before their Lord, alone, discrete. No huddled masses, no touching bodies,
No outstretched arms, each a ballerina *in situ*, a pose, perishing

With their individual grief. How simple and delicate this crucifixion
Business can be in the hands of Uccello. He must have envisioned them

As a fragrance, a sweet and spicy bouquet of common thyme or mock orange
In midsummer or the almond scent of certain flowers, a pathway of scented

Climbers that mark out boundaries like nothing else can. Each one
A pergola, arch, wall or pillar, laced with wisterias or roses,

Single stems surrounding the Cross, place by place, flower by flower,
Something moving towards the light and its limit. Afterwards, far away,

They will sit on the ground and pass around plates of nuts and figs.
The day will fall into twilight as if had not occurred at all, mercurial, stolen,

A haze that envelopes and then drifts past the trees. The sky
Carries the sound of distant hammerings muffled now as the cries

Of birds and each, alone, remains silent, feeling the clothes
They are wearing tear apart with each opening cry.

Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*

*O eyes my life, thereafter have no light,
Because it is not heaven where you are not.*

Michelangelo, *Madrigal 79*

A tapestry of drifting blue and the sheen of desire
A foreground of color and collapsed space

A table set in pink and white carnations,
And roses for the blue windows of heaven.

Odors of salt and sea, of shell and rose—
In this reckless Botticelean world of lush

And tantamount. Venus floating on her shell
And Hora waiting to take her nudity away.

Sticky, helpless with love, a season comes down
Around you—she has returned you

To the primavera after the fugue of winter,
Her body a mist of stone, the wettest faintness

Falling, and beneath the wanting,
The world like poised silence

And scattered sand on a blue ledge—an orient
Of beauty, and tomorrow's only thought.

Botticelli's *Costello Annunciation*

In Botticelli's *Costello Annunciation* it is Mary and Gabriel's gestures
That have caused so much confusion. How Mary's body, S-shaped, seems

Contorted, so supple, so lithe to the point of the impossible. When Leonardo
Saw the painting and her pose, he warned young painters of such errors—

Her movements, he suggested, seem too sudden, distant, awkward:
The Virgin appears surprised, almost frightened, and Gabriel

A near assailant or intruder filled with longing and apparent
Desperation—an uninvited angel. But it is also splendid, here, now,

In our century, in spite of Leonardo, how she moves away
From Gabriel with such perfect tenderness, her fluent hands held

Out as if pleading not to shatter her devotion and silence. She holds
Her head to one side, shy, sheepish, acrobatic as any virgin

Birth must be. Her head bent to one side, her eyes closed,
Her hands gracefully outstretched, a young girl who has not yet learned

To protest with confidence—the room a release of grey,
her pose a curved simplicity. Gabriel's lilies—

Wild, tall, exuberant—almost seem to collapse
Distance, held, as they are, before the door open

To a landscape. His red gown is billowy, repeated over and over
In the air and on the floor—how delicate the single tree

Stands behind him, the colloquial waters heading out
To sea, brushed by the turning pages of the wind, the ship

Voyaging towards the furrowed ocean, the grey of the sky
Tugging the white homeward—the stuff of airs. And whether

She is moving away or towards Gabriel
In this restless Botticellian space, she is thinking

About the sky out there, the blue barrenness that the linden
And apricot tress fill when they bloom—a singular mirage

That she had once called life—the day's warmth
Is falling away, the sweep of the nightly winds edging

Her thoughts of the alternating baths of light and dark—
The moon, she knows, will round its circumference into form,

And stitch by stitch, line by line, her halo begins
To melt down along the lining of her dress

Like a gold-fretted amphora containing already
Her every breath and only birth.

Mantenga's *Dead Christ*

The shroud is smooth, curved, moulded to his frame
Covering his body not as something above but

As something below and the paint is everywhere
In the dying address, a story dropping in, *filling, filling*,

A composition *centering, centering*, on its love,
And a time *dropping, dropping* into another,

The stare like a bringing in, an obedience,
An agony and obedience, the paint staring

Upward, a perishing and a *falling, falling*,
And now a writing and a simplicity *falling, falling*

An emptiness and a silence *spilling, spilling*—
And the wide stillness falling into the stony

Stillness and the sighs, *spilling*,
Filling, spilling— words, shadow, and flesh

And the shadow and the flesh and the words
And the tears *falling, falling*, and the paint *climbing*,

Climbing, the wounds *opening*,
Opening, dark and gashed, like something torn,

A portal opening, a moth's wings *climbing*,
Climbing, climbing above a light and the gaze

A bringing in and a coming near, a dead
Deepening gaze like an *emptying*,

Emptying hint, a hush and a shadowy hush
Meeting, meeting in the emptying stare,

And still no rustle, no sound, only tactile grace
Touching yours, *touching, touching—touching* yours.

Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*

You waited for him who died at thirty-seven. You left St. Peter's and walked down the Borgo Santo Spirito and crossed the Ponte Sant'Angelo and there, before the Chapel of the Holy Innocents, you met him, the man who made Rome. In 1450, on the Ponte Sant'Angelo, two hundred pilgrims were killed in a panic. *Mule-frightened, during the year of a Holy Jubilee*, he said, *they died one by one, their bodies floating like empty sacks along the Tiber River.*

In Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, the Virgin Mary appears as if she had just rescued her son from a burning city. She sweeps down through the parted curtains cradling him in her arms with a look of fear mingled with relief on her face.

And yet below, beneath St. Barbara and St. Sixtus, who are there to greet her, the two *putti* along the frame, with the three famous wings and bushy hair, seem to be bored, waiting an eternity in heaven's green and blue rooms for her and the child to arrive—looking up playfully, aloof almost, Raphael's angels, bored and placidly serene, already taken in long ago by what they no doubt knew to be the wonder of their arrival.

If you listen, you can still hear the voices of the Holy Innocents on Ponte Sant'Angelo as they crowd over the sides into the darkest waters of the year. You can still see the women and men embracing, clinging to each other as they stare down, moving closer towards the bridge's edge—a mouthful of salt already seeding the bitter taste to the winds. Listen to the bodies falling one splash after another over the sides of the bridge, and see now a frightened woman holding her disheveled child entering a safe heaven, Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* and her child, crossing over into the safe harbor of the frame, their faces filling with the wet alchemy of paint, a miracle of purpose, a forest of stone bending to the softening gaze of two placid angels amid the dreaming hold of the paint.

Masaccio's *Trinity*

So there it was, inside the sarcophagus, big-chested, ribbed,
Just as one would expect it to look. Above it everything

Set into dimension, the two Patrons, Mary and St. John,
Christ on the Cross, God the Father above, the falling dove

Below—depth and dimension. Masaccio, the *sloppy one*,
Some say it meant, who must have heard a voice saying
To him, *depth, dimension*. The two patrons, one dressed
In black, the other gray, kneel outside the area of the divine—

Wealth does have its limits. Christ above triumphantly. Mary's hand
Pointing to the emphatic message of salvation, her face

That of a confident, if somewhat angry mother, strangely
Misshaped and contorted, her hand almost limp,

A touch of revenge in her eyes, a unique Mary
Among the Marys. It is not closing time

But she has decided to go now, leave her place
In Santa Maria Novella. Outside, she drops her gaze

Towards the rubble street, so much decay—burnt twigs,
Apple cores and orange peels—left along the path that leads

To her home on Piazza Spirito 26. In her mind it is still 1428.
She can see the misty Apennine slope rise above

The swelling Arno, the shaded old walls of Florence.
Another day has burnt itself down, and she can hear

The trundling sounds of carts and street vendors on the streets
Mixing with the occasional closing of shutters overhead.

Already her neighbors have gone in, a mother and two
Children gone to a table of fish, bread and wine. Her house

Is filled with the scent of daffodils and buttercups,
Garlic and olives, distinct and discrete amid lavender bells

And pomegranates. St. John gazes up at her, the donors
Sitting quietly at her table, mantled with bowls of fruit

And a white cloth that drapes one corner. Silently
She washes her hands before a window looking

Over Santa Maria Novella where she can see
Acrobats, their pennants flying out before a group

Of children. The city is breaking down below,
Snapping shut behind shutters and balconies.

Santa Maria Novella is closed, and all the weary
Tourists have gone home. The twilight begins

To darken the outline below of an acrobat
Whose shaded pennants at times dim then are taken in

By the darker shade, opulent strings of color folding
Into the dark to the sound of distant fiddles and violins.

One child is reaching up for a stick and a pennant
And the boy's cries hold out against the dark blue

Of the twilight sky, the child
Leaping up for the pennant

Amid the cypress and olive trees. She stares down
At this city of light and shade, of hills and balconies,

And then for an instant,
No longer filled with the confidence of salvation,

For an instance between the breaking light
And the surrendering mood

She is down on the streets, wailing and crying,
Broken by her grief,

Reaching out for each child's hand,
Holding with both hands each child's face, until at last alone

Broken, drowned and drowning, she finds herself
Amid the fiddles and violins, a woman

Who has lost her only son to the acrobats,
The flying pennants and the shadows.