

DIPTYCH II
I. PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA'S *THE DEATH OF ADAM*
(DETAIL)

*Juan Carlos Vargas Bolaños**

Not that it matters much, but I guess we just don't think of him, or her,
As getting old. But Piero did and in his *Story of Adam*, he is there,

On the ground naked as a sheep, and right above him is Eve, holding a cane,
Her head wrapped in nothing more than rags, a skimpy translucent gown for

A dress. That's how Piero saw his life ending up, surrounded by two of his sons,
A doddering old man who seems lost there on the ground. Or maybe he got up

And walked off by himself, naked, bedraggled, his palms sweaty with fear,
His mind filled with the regret he had carried down through the years,

With the tossing voices that he must have heard at night
In the deep oceans of his sleep, the rafts that broke

Up on his shore, once tidy boats, marooned now as surely as then.
But what was old age to this vibrant boy who knew and lost paradise?

What was it to her, who found herself now still alive, an old woman
Who embraced her wandering gait, shuffled at times now with sleepy

Feet over the thick clods of dirt or large stones about the yard, the sound
Of rain breaking in the distance carrying with it timberline aromas,

Something dwindling to the local. And they must have heard
It all, the complaints of their sons, told their stories probably

One too many times . . . *Sin . . . Death . . . Labor . . .* And yet
Now on the ground he seems to be telling it all again to his sons

As if it were fresh expiation, like a fruit a parent needs to leave
Out for a child, a keystone of longing that he can never reach

* Profesor de la Escuela de Lenguas Modernas, Universidad de Costa Rica.

Or bring down, his cargo of regret carried in his sullen voice—deep,
 Decrepit, hesitant—his train of thought illusive at times as pigeons
 In flight, these milling attentive boys, lithe and sprightly
 And increasingly breaking with sorrow as the words spill forth.

The ground seems blistering in the distance with rocks
 Pale as contrition—in this half-dreamt place of the first

And ultimate exiles who can speak of their homeland with the taste
 Of grapes and apricots fresh on their tongues—a small ship

Of sensations, sights and odors from the homeland, the Father-
 Land drifting on to shore every day. Helped by one of his sons,

He goes over to his cot beneath a lean-to made of leaves
 And there, half asleep, this breath of a man, this drowned

Sailor whose tattoo spells his grief, whose curse leaps out at
 Him even in the shallowest sleep, muttering, *murder*,

Murder as he coils his arms around her and holds her tightly in his arms
 Each night. Where is the grace that can take these terrors away,

These nights without redemption, these days that serve as only endless
 Mirrors for what they had done? There is forgiveness for all,

But who among us has felt it other than as a summer's twilight
 At beach's end consoling in an instant then lengthening beyond

Our reach. Piero knew—as he painted Eve, there behind Adam, flaccid,
 Pale, broken, this spiritless woman, who in her old age found her life

Ringed with the emptiness of four walls, and tonight as they move
 Towards each other and embrace, as they sit alone, quieted

By the stillness, their boys off already to another nightshift
 Of dutiful labor, they sit silent on the earthen floor, their eyes

Dazed and glaring out at the angel back there. Paradise bedraggled
 By them, sullied and soiled. Now they sit and stare. They might

As well have tried to forget, to let the memories drain out
 With their lovemaking—they were meant for each other,

These two bodies, boisterous now, loud, the hand clapping,
 The cupped palm upturned, their fears coming home at last.
 There was of course more to it than this—more than even anyone could

II. MASACCIO'S *EXPULSION*

Have foreseen. The hesitation, the sleepy gait, the dry distant look

That must have stayed on their faces for days at a time, the wings
Of angels, the cool scent of apple and oil caught in the downdraft

Of their lifting, the lost ways amid the rains, and the final break,
The snap and crack of the black flags stretching over their heads

And crossing over their love in the vacant purity back there.
What could have healed them beneath this oath of sky, beneath

This flame of sword and angel as the sky trickled past blue by blue.
What is the grief, in the end, of one unforgiven act, a sparrow's wing

Light upon lavender flowers? They soon found a path down to the sea
Where they tasted the swirl and bitter spumes on their parched lips

And mouths. They heard the waking of the surf and smelled the sweet
Orange trees bringing forth the small buds of their bees . . . And the wind

Came at them through the trees and in that shattering above they heard
The late forest of their music, a chirping through a wild untouchable

Foliage coming at them from a primeval forest, sweet sapphires
Of sound joining the syllables on their breaths, sung by a voice

Scattering itself amid the light from which a single sparrow
Came forth and broke into two for they would now have to send

Their breaths and voices on sparrow's wings even into the darkest nights.
So they reached down and tasted the apple and orange

And grape succulent on their tongues, tongues that had once
Uttered the words, *Prayer, Thanksgiving, Love* that would now

Only be able to say, LOVE, as they reached
For the fruit again and again.
A butterfly's yawn upon a leaf, the exact

LEONARDO'S *MADONNA OF THE ROCKS*

Translation of itself, the whole
 A delicate humming star, a dreamed,
 Far-off light flamed with yellows
 And blues and luminous scars
 Of stone yet soft and quiet as
 The spume-luminous curls
 Of his angel, the plume-
 Soft of supple hair, or a
 Butterfly's yawn upon a leaf.

Or a red butterfly's yawn upon a leaf
 The wings hardly visible, bits of iridescence
 Coiling away into dark and the angel
 Is glancing back and down at us,
 The background lit with tints
 Of yellowish blue, the soft curves
 Of children's flesh, a child's puckered
 Face, the scene soft and quiet
 As the yawn of a red
 And blue butterfly on a leaf.

Or a scarlet butterfly's yawn upon a leaf
 An idiomatic finger, tendril-thin,
 Pointing to St. John, the wings
 Hardly visible, coiling away into dark;
 Chubby cherubims facing each other,
 The unimaginable gaze of St. John,
 The scene set amid the rocks soft
 And quiet as the yawn
 Of a scarlet,
 Red and blue butterfly on a leaf.
 Okay, yes, love begins as a curiosity and ends perhaps as a sacrifice.

**DOMENICO GHIRLANDAIO'S *PORTRAIT OF AN OLD MAN
AND HIS GRANDSON***

But that's one way to lose love, to tell your lover that all signs are meant

Literally, that the paint will follow you wherever you go, or that paranoia
Is a circumstance in which you find yourself as the only person left in the

Circle. The boy's hands reach up to him, in love? And Ghirlandaio's old man,
Disfigured horribly by illness, whose eyes and mouth remark upon goodness

Must have felt the burden, the self-loathing, the passionless dice of luck
That the Middle Ages had wrought for him as he stared down into that

Unspeakable beauty of the boy or as he walked the streets of Florence
Each day. In the background, there is a window and a perfect landscape,

A road trailing away through trees down to a lake, a scene that carries you
Away into the mythic, the bright light of the unscared, the perfect. What

Longing are we to hunger for after this? I see him walking now
The streets of Florence, his head tilted slightly from his shame,

His body hugging each corner, the proximity of walls, his hands thrust
Into his pockets, eyes shifting from person to person, down the narrow

Pathways and streets marking his way to the marketplace filled with odors
Of chestnuts and laurel, the common life that he knows and loves so much.

He watches two children beneath an almond tree playing tag and for a moment
He feels like joining them, both scurrying after them and being the one

Who has been caught in front of a small wooden door. The day's light glances
Off the facades of doorways and brick as shadows kneel on the street lined

With the small radiances of noon, and with the colors of sweet wine,
Red and scarlet velvet of women walking the streets. There are heartaches that last

A lifetime, interrupted here and there by a sudden face and caress, a kiss given

As quickly as it is taken away, these endless disjointed moments

That restore the lost child, a broken love, our failed destinations,
Secrets a body comes to absorb then emulates with our distinct gaits,

Our folded hands that define a body's width and stamina, a body's apparel
And its curses. And, yes, even a child's gaze that overcomes

In its curiosity all the blemishes that mark out the physical soul's blistery
Surface—or that reveals how love reaches itself, starts to break apart, the mind

Waking in paranoia, and no one to tell. Someone must have told the child to
Go and see. And as the old man walks through the town he hears the child's

Voice asking, why? how? A voice soft as lilies falling through air,
Creased into the echoes of street carts chiming like bells edging him

Forward stride after stride. But how is he to answer that design is not
Intent or a robin's flight is multiplied only by the number one? The moment

Drops into memory like a stone into water, a calm surface rippled and creased
By one incalculable weight, a child's love being quizzical and masking

Itself—a child's gaze, a given kiss, and the unanswerable questions
That become refrains of sounds in the dark of night, a street boy's cries,

The sky singing its last song, its whine and cry, or a bird's late song, thin and long
Resembling the distance to get back there and, sure enough, there he is plodding

His way towards that landscape and winding road that is already back somewhere
On Ghirlandaio's wall breaking up the gray color, encompassed and encompassing.
