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Let's Talk About It

Jan Garden Castro

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BOOK REVIEWS

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

Jan Garden Castro

EVERY DAY WE GET MORE ILLEGAL

Juan Felipe Herrera

City Lights Publishers

<http://www.citylights.com/book/?GCOI=87286100162250>

96 Pages; Print, \$10.47

The “Firefly on the Road North” — the child who has been detained in a cage or who is in a precarious situation — is the key to appreciating Juan Felipe Herrera’s new book *Every Day We Get More Illegal*. As this book was published in September 2020, the dire straits for DACA and illegal immigrants, especially children, became less and less visible due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the upcoming Presidential elections, and the rise of authoritarian regimes worldwide. Herrera wrote these stories of suffering, hardships, and deaths among diverse Latin communities during his travels throughout the United States when he was US Poet Laureate, 2015-2017. Herrera dedicates the book to everyone he has met on his life journey, starting with “the migrants, immigrants, and refugees suffering from the border installations within the United States, at the border crossing and throughout Latin America.”

The format is deceptively simple: the book’s six sections each have the same title — “Address Book for the Firefly on the Road North” and are numbered #1-6. The first piece, a journal entry from 2017, is a meditation about finding America:

America We Talk About It
Summer Journals — August 8 2017

— every day of the week. It is not easy.
First I had to learn. Over decades — to take care of myself. Are you listening. I had to learn. I had to gain, pebble by pebble, seashell by seashell, the courage to listen to my self. My true inner self. For that I had to push you aside. It was not easy I had pushed aside my mother my father my self in that artificial stairway of becoming you to be inside of you — after years I realized perhaps too late there

was no way I could bring them back I could not rewind the clock. But I did — I could do one thing. I could care. Now we — are here.

Starting with this prose poem, the reader must navigate where each thought begins and ends, any deeper meanings, and what the nouns and pronouns refer to. Sometimes the “you” in the poem is America, sometimes it’s the “self,” and sometimes it’s the reader. Which “you” is the narrator pushing aside? In its own way, this work asks us each to find and bring back an America that values the individual. This poem asks big questions. How does the poet, as the child of migrant workers, grow up honoring his parents yet also not following exactly in his parents’ footsteps by living the life of a migrant worker? How does a child enter the American dream if the dream has left him/her/them out? If he somehow grows up to become Poet Laureate of the United States and a representative for America, how does he call on the “we” in the poem to care, to rethink America’s history and to see lives already lost or those presently marginal and endangered? This piece ends “Now we — are here,” and these four words are loaded with ambiguity. Will the “we” join the “I” that cares? Are the “we” human targets of hate and bigotry or people who see and care about the targeted group? Is “here” the present

The child who has been detained in a cage or who is in a precarious situation is the key to appreciating Every Day We Get More Illegal.

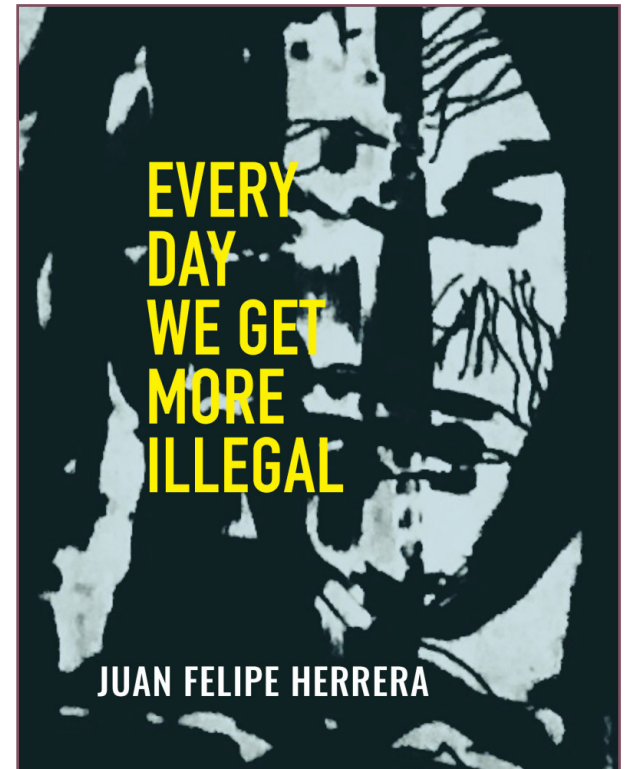
situation or a platform for Americans working to solve issues related to immigration, xenophobia, and racism?

The poems in this short section intermix little signs of nature — a leaf; the poet Chinese Basho (1644-1694) walking the narrow road to the deep north (or the interior); Nelson Mandela, who protested segregation in South Africa; and Elias Canetti, whose 1960 book *Crowds and Power* addresses what Herrera calls “a hunting pack” mentality — bloodless yet out for blood. The poem “You Just Don’t Talk About it” addresses the gulf between Americans who seem oblivious and illegal immigrants who face:

...the rape the assault
the segregation the jailing the deportations upon deportations
the starving the ones curled up on the freezing detention corners
because they wanted to touch you to meet you against all odds
and you — you
just don’t talk about it

As in the first poem, the “you” is an America that seems to have forgotten its founding principles.

Part three of the book continues the trope of showing how America has become divided and how entry, legal or illegal, can become an impossible riddle. “Interview w/a Border Machine” opens:



can you please state your name
Xochitl Tzompantli
what kind of name is that
it was given to me by an indian woman
black hair long black shawl — it means *Skull Rack Flower*

This and other poems in section three show the divide between the two sides and the degrees of misunderstanding that arise as a result. These poems offer no mediators, no friendly pro bono lawyers to rescue those in distress. This same rupture continues on another front in the poem “i am not a paid protestor.” Here, the authority figure and the protestor disagree about free will; the authority figure eventually becomes confused about what he’s doing and why he’s doing it.

Part four moves from ancestors to children and parents separated by border camps, deportation, and death. “border fever 105.7 degrees” names one little firefly whom the chapter headings address — Jakelin Amei Rosemery from Guatemala who died with a high fever in a detention camp: “a lost flame a firefly ... where did she go?” This poem ties together Basho, the eternal search for moral and physical directions, and the cruel ways the most vulnerable suffer. Paying attention to the pronouns makes the poem poignant — the border guard is the dispassionate “you” reporting the death. The narrator’s “I” is balanced by the “they” and “she” who are lost: “where do I go where did they go.”

Chapters five and six consist of three longer poems in English and Spanish. The titles “I want to speak of unity,” “Ten Thousand Lives,” and “come with me” all suggest a new tone and hope. The first two pieces together parts of Herrera’s own journey, starting in Los Angeles in ’67 with a “cardboard box luggage piece” and, by ’88, in a place on 24th & Capp Street “where we talked & thought & invented our liberations” “come with me” invites peace, unity, and “dancing strangers” whispering in lost languages. Herrera offers ceremonial fires, and a traditional sweat lodge where a silent communion will purify all who enter:

—Castro continued on page 22



we will greet each other once again
 I will write in rhythms as the words come
 to me
 you will walk in — this is my hope
 nos saludaremos de nuevo
 yo escribiré en ritmos así como las palabras
 vienen a mí
 tú entrarás — esta es mi esperanza
Translation to Spanish by Lauro Flores

Every Day We Get More Illegal, like Herrera's more than two dozen earlier books, includes Spanish words that are translated — repeated in English — nearby, making the Spanish easy to understand. Herrera's seemingly simple language is nuanced and rhythmic in both languages.

He often leaves out capitalization and punctuation giving each word a floating quality.

Herrera lives in Fresno, California, where he directs the Laureate Lab Visual Words Studio at California State University. Over half of his two dozen publications are books for children and young adults. I read two: *Jabber-Walking*, 2018, takes the reader onto paths of word power and self-expression and features wild, dramatic typefaces and illustrations. *Cinnamon Girl*, 2005, takes place on the Lower East Side, or *Loisaida* and movingly recreates the tales of Uncle DJ, “wrapped in gauze,” injured during the World Trade Center 9/11 bombing and his mentee, *Cinnamon Girl*, or *Canelita*. This novel addresses serious issues that mixed heritage and darker-skinned teens and children face and employs an assortment of letters,

poems, and prose and an English-Spanish glossary at the end. For adults, Herrera's 2007 *City Lights* book, *187 Reasons Mexicanos Can't Cross the Border* gathers writings from 1963-2006 (he was born in 1948) from nine prior books. Herrera's awards include the Ezra Jack Keats Award for *Calling the Doves* (1995) and the Américas Award for *CRASHBOOMLOVE* (1999).

Jan Garden Castro (www.jancastro.com/) *Castro's Afterword for the illustrated edition of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale comes out from Suntu in 2022. Castro's books include Sonia Delaunay: La Moderne (2002) and The Last Frontier (2001), and she is Contributing Editor for Sculpture Magazine.*

Hitchcock continued from previous page

thematize the politics of affiliation and expression. Much of this comes down to the chaotic surfaces and multi-modal aesthetics of *United States of Banana*, the novel that is the subject of over half of the essays in the collection. The emphasis is well-deserved because in this text Braschi boldly takes the position that the “fictions” of US territoriality necessitate a counter-discourse of decoloniality, one which, rather than assume struggle is a professional parade of virtue validation, dreams of Puerto Rican island identity as unassimilable, as radically inconsistent

with the logic of a US-derived plebiscito. In the interview with Rolando Perez that ends the volume, Braschi affirms the nature of this poetic license, and indeed the power of poetry itself, novelized. That kind of enigmatic flourish is typical of Braschi and makes her Latinx poetics difficult, both as hard to understand and as uncontrollable. It is a tribute to the editors and contributors to *Poets, Philosophers, Lovers* that they maintain the contradictory tenor of Braschi's oeuvre because in those contradictions she yet offers a belief in being without borders

(“ninguno tenga una frontera”) which is reason enough to take this work and hers more seriously.

Peter Hitchcock is Professor of English at the Graduate Center and Baruch College of the City University of New York. His books include Dialogics of the Oppressed (1992), Oscillate Wildly (1999), Imaginary States (2003), The Long Space (2009), and Labor in Culture (2017). His next book is on seriality and social change.

A POST-APOCALYPTIC POETICS

Jane Rosenberg LaForge

THE GNOME STORIES

Ander Monson

Graywolf Press

www.graywolfpress.org/books/gnome-stories

176 Pages; Print, \$16.00

The thirteen short stories in Ander Monson's latest collection, *The Gnome Stories*, are about the “after,” what happens once the apocalypse is over. Monson finds plenty of disasters that mar everyday life in America, whether he is trawling the suburban homes, workplaces, refuges, or the metaphorical prisons of his characters. Amid terrorist bombings, bizarre scientific advances, the production of reality television programs, and police brutality, Monson delves into the mechanisms of coping and mourning and finds them wanting. Perhaps he has unloaded too much onto his characters. Death with complications — a man grieves for the girlfriend who turned down his marriage proposal; a mother laments over her daughter, the suicide, and her son, too young to drive but taken by a car accident — is the norm in his world. But the more his characters commiserate, the more they discover there is no real divide between their lives pre- or post-cataclysm. “If you look close enough, the seam,” explains an artist's assistant, of sorts, about that moment of separation, when one existence is ripped away and replaced with another,

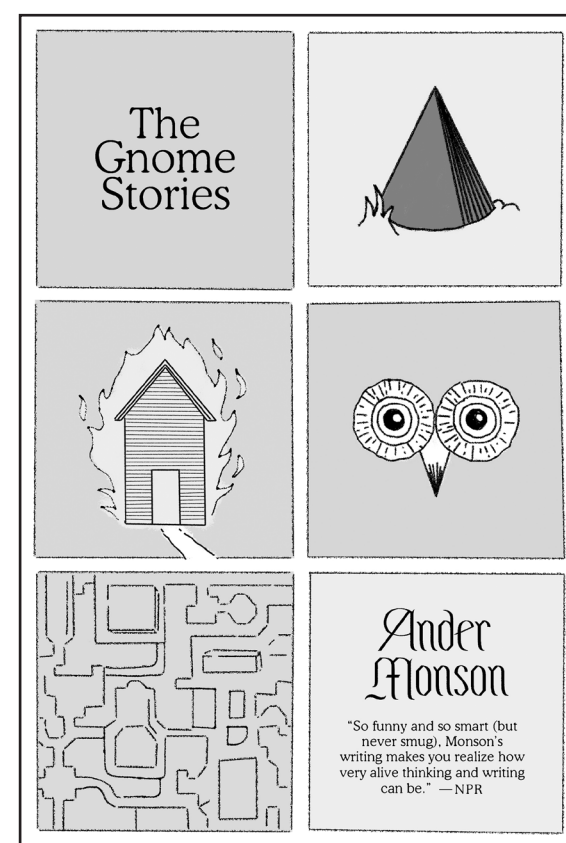
The way we work out memories, what gets stored, starred for later easy retrieval, what gets discarded boarded up ... these are

abysses with no bottom. Narrative works like this. Our lives work like this. Our lives are not narrative except as synapse makes them so.

If Nietzsche tried to disabuse mortals of the notion that the distinctions they make, particularly through language, are meaningless, then Monson insists on illustrating how and why we hold onto those perceptions. That he also uses a combination of science fiction, urban folklore, and fairy tale to justify his characters' lives is testimony to the

Monson delves into the mechanisms of coping and mourning and finds them wanting.

tenacity of human belief. Some of the circumstances here seem to have been pulled from the headlines, like the 2010 gas line explosion in San Bruno, California, in “Believing in the Future with the Torturer's Apprentice.” In “Everybody Looks Better When They're Under Arrest,” Monson treats us to the inside scoop of how reality television is made — or not made, crushing the dreams of desperate and self-destructive would-be celebrities. “We love to be anonymous among the crowd pending our new fame when it finally comes and the joy of not being able to leave the house for fear of the paparazzi,” the narrator admits; he speaks in anticipation of that instant when his kitchen is transformed and, along with it, his life and marriage. No situation is too small or outlandish for Monson's characters to force their sense of linear time on in order to create their personal epic, even if the results are inconsequential. Sometimes they are fatal. Always the rituals or routines that might have



once comforted them are revealed as losses — of power, agency, even decency.

“Between people, you see a number of different bonds. They act over great distances. They even — so she posits privately — work across boundaries of the seen world and the unseen one that hides behind us all the time.” This comes from a physicist, who will later cite Newton's Second Law of Thermodynamics, in “This Time with Feeling.” Despite her scientific training, she still seeks a way out, or a way around, the boundaries that she knows are as real as the fireworks streaming past her house. It is the seam, or boundary, that drives her thoughts:

————— *LaForge continued on next page*