

Poetry Series

**Leo Briones**  
**- poems -**

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# Leo Briones(6-16-63)

Poet biography- Leo Victor Briones

Leo Victor Briones was born in El Paso, Texas in 1963. His father came from a family of "mueblerias" or furniture makers who fled the Mexican Revolution for border town of El Paso. His mother's family, first generation immigrants, but well established in the social circles of Northern Mexico, West Texas, and New Mexico. His grandmother's second cousin was the lauded Mexican muralist, David Alfaro Siqueiros. Briones credits his blending of art and with social justice to this family lineage. "Siqueiros believed that any form of art should be available to all people — even the desperately poor. And that art should have a social conscience. I too believe that art should have a purpose whether for social change or spiritual transcendence, " reflects Briones.

Briones was profoundly affected by the tumult into which he was born: the assassinations of the John and Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and the Vietnam War. His early intellectual influences were not writers but musicians: Bob Dylan, Bob Marley, Marvin Gaye, Neil Young and other socially conscious artists.

In high school, Briones met Walter Kelly, his English teacher who would become his lifelong mentor and editor. Through Kelly, he was introduced to the poetry of Dylan Thomas, T.S. Elliot, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Dickinson, Pablo Neruda, Carl Sandburg, and Robinson Jeffers. These poets inspired Briones to begin writing at the age of fifteen. He wrote sporadically until he was in his early thirties. Then Briones wrote no poetry for nearly eight years.

In 2005 his best friend, actor, playwright, and community activist Quentin Drew passed away a victim of kidney cancer. The painful consequences of Drew's illness and death awakened Briones once more to his love of verse. Mr. Briones reflects, "Q believed that everyone should pursue their art. Whether it was acting, theater, raising a family, or being a poet. Every time I write I do so in honor of his life and in that spirit."

Today Mr. Briones studies under the tutelage of prominent poet and writing teacher Cathy Colman. Colman known by many as "the Muse", for her celebrity client list, is the winner of the prestigious Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry,2001.

Mr. Briones' debut book *The Poet Remains* was published in October of 2006. *The Poet Remains* a mixture of meditations, love poems and Beat poetry was well

received and was highlighted at The Southern Festival of Books: A Celebration of the Written Word in Memphis, Tennessee. Subsequently Mr. Briones was invited to a poetry reading series across several states including venues in Columbia and Charleston, SC; and Savannah and Atlanta, GA. Leo Victor Briones has been honored as the featured poet at the famous Beyond Baroque in Venice California as well as other Spoken Word venues in the Los Angeles area.

Recently, Mr. Briones finished the manuscript for his second book of poems Postcards from the Apocalypse. The work deals with issues of the post, post, post Modern world from love to war and everything in-between.

Leo Victor Briones owns his own communications firm in Los Angeles, California. A single father he has two curious, engaging and strictly high maintenance sons; Andres 14 and Diego 11.

# A Blessing For Baby Love

She is the girl with hair two shades redder than a pecan pie. She is the girl with whom

I want to yarn a twisting reverie of a lazy southern moon, slung flush on the horizon like a long and rising sun.

It is late summer and the air is still sticky as an old swamp ghost. Frogs and crickets

keen like panthers into the night. Behind four Doric pillars and a wrap around porch, you

can hear the madness in the slow, southern, feminine of a mother's drawl,

"You ripped your dress, your shoes have mud, watch your manners sugar girl."

Hiding on the other side of heavy oak door— little Miss Georgia nineteen-thirty four, slender and pretty as a meadow in her light peach summer dress.

Still this beauty queen screeches like a raccoon caught dead eye as her ivory-toothed comb pulls and tugs at baby love's blaze of curls,

"Why does he love you more? Why does he love you more? "

And I want to tell that little girl with a heart that roars like a river and tomboy legs that run through the red clay mud—that I know behind those pale eyes

there is a sadness that has no sound and wafts on the summer breeze like a slow death.

I want to tell that little girl who, all grown now, but still chews a dandelion's stem—

I want to tell her and her tender smile, "Oh darling girl, I too have heard the unheard sound and floated on the sticky air of death. And through it all I've tugged the roots beneath the ground only to see them hang before me with their authenticity of sand and soil

to reveal,

"Why he loved you more than her. Why he loved you so much more than her."



# A Lesson That Has Come To Pass

A lesson that has come to pass  
to my mother Delfina Irene Briones

It is true that the naked eye can never know  
if it is chick or yolk behind the egg shell—

still, I ponder if the sky was full of sun or gloom  
the day you realized I was growing inside of you—

as a child I remember swallows spinning  
tiny gourds of mud and sticks under the eaves—

then one day your little boy, who never  
wanted anything more than the delight of being loved,

noticed that life was as quick and cruel as a late Spring storm  
that flung the nests and speckled eggs to the ground.

So you came to me, held my hand,  
whispered with a sacred breath

it is gravity that spins the world  
and inertia that drives nothing to exploding stars

but only love shall calm the shaking heart.

Leo Briones

# A Love Song Of Earth

What if I gave to you  
the silver sun that rises inside of me  
and every day closed the eyes of my heart  
like a meditation that flies across  
the bursting galaxies of time  
and when I reached that place  
where lovers are no longer afraid to grab  
the molten lava of endlessness  
toss it back and forth among each other  
and finally eye-to-eye, lips-to-lips, thigh-to-thigh  
make love in the steam of earth?  
And what if I sang a song to you,  
a song of the soil and the simple dew of dawn,  
that meant something like—  
we are children no more  
yet neither are we old?

Leo Briones

# A Poem For The Kingdom At The End Of The World

The end of the world has come  
and I sit in a wicker chair to the right hand of God.  
I notice a group of people weeping.  
I turn to God and ask,  
"What, God, do you call these sad people? "  
From his throne, made of mud and straw,  
God replies, his voice like the whisking wind,  
"They are called refugees."  
I hardly understand for God's voice is fast and loud.

A ghost among ruins, I begin to navigate the crowd.  
I ask a woman with dark skin and eyes like coffee beans,  
"What do you call yourself? What do you call your child? "  
"I am a whore, " she says "and this is my bastard child.  
His father was a soldier; he raped me.  
So I am left a whore and my little girl the mud of earth."

I open the door of a crude hut made of sticks and grass.  
Inside there is a small boy; perhaps seven-years old,  
it's hard to know, his lips the desert floor,  
his skin a burnt offering, his eyes an altar of despair.  
I look at him, sick with sin, and ask his name,  
"What do they call you boy? How have you come to be here? "  
He answers with the surprising confidence of dying lion,  
"In my village they called me a warrior. God has called me to conquer  
the evildoers. Because I have failed, he has left me here."

For hours, I walk with these simple people, astonished  
by their shades of yellow, brown, pink, purple, and blue—  
in them I see the dawn and the dusk.

Finally, I return to my wicker chair  
to listen for God among the wind.  
When he returns to me, I cannot help but ask again,  
"What God do you call these sad people? "

Then

I finally hear, for I have ears,

I finally see, for I eyes,  
I anoint God's booming reply  
with myrrh and frankincense,  
lock it in the alabaster box of love,

"They are the humble and the meek,  
preparing to rule the earth I seek."

Leo Briones

# A Profound Sense Of Ardor

You chose me—  
the poet of the world  
to sing like a glass of fire.  
And every time we lay down,  
to remind you of the amber lust of stones.

With acorn eyes, you stare  
into the hole of quiet anarchy, then  
like an otter's claw clamped on a turtle's egg,  
claim, "It is all just time."

I think it neither tribal nor modern—  
to discover the sun shining on the iced tundra  
and find the prophet, who has traveled  
through time's twisted tunnel—  
dried and broken,  
lost amid his spirals and moans,

his cracked lips  
can barely utter,

"I too have made love  
to the inexplicable girl."

Leo Briones

# Aarghs Poetica!

(for Tina)

They are the too-smug pirates of pseudo-intellectualism  
who rub the perfectly coarse, mud-stained words of poetry  
to the nub, to the last grain of sand—  
still the poem's not done yet,  
still it's in need of another email to the Ivy league  
or a swim across the stormy river to Cambridge  
or perhaps they need to steal a Ouija Board,  
summon the spirits of Homer and Shelley,  
insist that the pentameter rhymes with the iambic.

Least we whine until weary, we have been warned —  
the wild-eyed, bearded Ginsberg  
sane enough to slam his fist,  
"First thought, best thought."

After all, what if Zen changed its mind and said,  
"Wait a second the moment will soon be here, then we can live"  
or Jesus announced from Olives, "Blessed are those that wait,  
eventually the muse will come your way."

Or think of Bukowski, Pepto Bismol in hand, waving off the low lives,  
waiting for his stomach to get past the puking stage  
and only then to blurt, "Son of a Bitch, I forgot the whole fuckin poem! "

Yes, like mowing your lawn until there is only dirt left,  
or washing the no-stick pan until it's the too-sticky pan.  
There is a common way to grind genius in the garbage disposal  
like chicken bones, to butcher innocence  
like a mother putting lipstick on her two year old.

So—  
new poet, young poet, love poet, layman poet, Mom poet,  
paper bag poet, dead poet, Colman poet, activist poet, secret poet—  
they will get into your dreams like Freddie Krueger on acid,  
like your arrogant college professor with nothing better to do than  
masturbate to pictures of his high school sweetheart who dumped him thirty-  
years ago,

like the Stassi claiming Othello was full of subversion,  
or the drunk white trash Dad who slaps his kid's faces  
then tells them they'll never amount to nothing.

Yes, they'll get you and when you're dead and ready to be buried  
they'll toss the pen and paper of every poem you've ever written into your coffin,

say with their stiff upper lip quivering,  
"If only they would have edited."

Leo Briones

## And Then There Was This...

Amongst the dead and broken  
you have ignited a violet and mustard explosion.  
Buried in the rubble of scarlet memories  
are the piercing pewter knives and silver arrows  
of deep and black betrayals.  
An old man gray and gnarled  
pleads the blood magic of their resurrection;  
but the children running in the emerald meadow  
where ruby wild flowers can never wilt  
hum as the rainbow hummingbirds hums.  
The crevices that hold the hollow voices  
beneath the puce rubble—  
sepulchers of the forever forgotten.

Leo Briones

# Anonymous

Darkness courts the moon  
and the day adores the sun.  
But the sound of the mad bard  
is a lunatic's clamor in the wind  
that only for the first second  
can be heard above the crowd, and then  
the howl of sifting grit on the sandy storm—  
this a natural occurrence  
of life's sometimes chaotic ways. And  
in all of this the poet hears only  
an echo of himself, as if it is spoken  
by his tongue, yet not his at all, but by every other  
spirit or tongue  
that has professed itself before  
or after  
time  
was formed  
of love's imagining.  
Still,  
the poet does indeed have a name,  
but he no longer shares it,  
because once he told his lover  
after they became one on the sand  
what he meant by his coming home,  
only to have her scribble  
of his renown  
on a scrap of paper,  
shove it in a bottle sealed with wax,  
and then serve it to a wave.  
Years later, he heard from an angry woman,  
from a land far, far away;  
she reminded him of all the pain  
he had taken and given without recourse.  
And she questioned  
why  
for so much time he refused to write,  
to sing of naked verses and faultless rhymes,  
and then suddenly,  
as though he expected something he could never have,

he proclaimed— the poet remains.  
This only goes to prove  
the poet is everything, yet nothing;  
and it shall always be that way.

Leo Briones

# Armistice

We walk barefooted on terrazzo floors.

In the chamber,

hear the echo

of Caesar's death gurgle

as destinies iron dagger,

adorned in emeralds and garnets,

slits the throat of tyranny.

We walk

        bamboo below our feet

baffled by the sound of nothingness.

In the hallway,

Buddha meditates across the

rainbow swirl of the universe—

in-and-out; we wait for boundless quiet

only to hear—

□ on the breeze of the Cold War

the growl of the Cambodian sun bear,

who lays on a rock and listens

to the quiet but certain moan

of the skull strewn killing fields of Pol Pot.

We walk rock, dry grass and dust below our feet.

On this road to Golgotha,

beneath the screams and wails,

there is an eerie silence.

Perhaps the devil dances in the distance;

but it high priests in blue robes

who smile wryly before the people

and mock this last chance—

True God of true God;

why does the wolf so often kill its young?

and we walk

on shell casing spent

from tiny cartridges of death,

ockets of sandstone or shiny glass?

It is the same drone of hatred

that ushers in the next sun.

and what are we to care?

□

After all,

this is just war.

Kill or be killed.

Leo Briones

# Baggage Claim

In the powdered ashes  
of my last rental car,  
leave the remains  
of a contract,  
we once celebrated like Fall harvest—  
leave you pointing to your heart  
as you say you can no longer hear the sound  
or feel the pounding of the moment that connects  
a collection with the carousel of joy.

Now, I am left to lift three bags from my trunk—  
□  
one beige, filled with dirty tee shirts  
and love stained briefs,  
□  
another red and heavy  
of wine, faux truffles and trekking gear,  
□  
the third is black, empty, and spotless—  
other than  
the soiled silence of memory.

Leo Briones

# Barely Avoiding Zarathustra

In the sullen darkness  
It has come to this—  
The fog and haze  
Stand between us and eternity.  
We wonder  
What if Nietzsche had it right  
and Romantic temperament,  
is but a castle built  
upon the sand of sentiment.  
And we  
like spoiled children  
seek Mother's milk,  
or Father's steady hand,  
only to grovel and beg  
for more porridge.  
So through this fog,  
beyond this haze,  
□ babes on Judgment Day,  
we kneel before a white throne  
made of pearls and sunlight □  
and cry like wounded lambs—  
knowing  
we were never Supermen  
nor for a second  
believed that God was dead.

Leo Briones

# Birth—

whether it was blindly abstract  
or specific as an arrow—  
that bursting star  
said something to me  
about permanence.  
Even now I can smell  
the bloom of the its flicker,  
the original charge and thunder  
that is always new—  
yet older than molten rock,  
than gaseous gatherings  
or cooled stone.  
I know somewhere  
deep in the reaches,  
like paused breathe,  
or quick fright,  
I cannot forget the motion of sound.  
The lack of everything to the profusion of all.  
I touch the first grip,  
whiff he original sweat,  
dream the splitting of  
chaos and reason  
before I could think of either.

Leo Briones

# Ceremonies

Now that my kid is cool—

I can't just go into my chest-of-draws  
and grab my sub-commandante Marcos t-shirt,  
or the one blazoned with NWA World's Most Dangerous Band  
or even that black shirt with red Hanji letters that says  
something in Cantonese, I don't even remember.

Yes, they've been nabbed in a generational heist  
that would make any Madison Ave. retro-maven proud.

Yes, now that my kid is cool.

I can't come over and give him a big dad-love hug.  
Well, actually I can. The problem is I risk being thrown  
into a very full-nelson, sharp elbow in my back and him saying,  
"Sweet move, huh Dad? "  
I should have never validated the whole—  
"wrestling is the new football thing."

Yes, now that my kids are cool.  
That's right plural. Sixteen and twelve  
is the ultimate Mini-Me equation of growing up.  
Simply put, if ME even suggests it  
then MINI want to do it FIRST and BETTER!

So slipping an opinion, in edge-wise, is a declaration intra-tribal warfare  
that would make the ancient Celtics proud.

Like trying to figure out if Elton John is rock star  
or some pre-French Revolution pop icon dandy.

Personally, I think it's a little bit of both.  
But the very mention of the Mozart of Modern Rock  
and one would think I said the crescent moon was full.

I mean giving an opinion in is like slapping a shark  
or being driven into silence like an ascetic monk,  
"Dad. Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, Hendrix...

now that's rock and roll. I mean Dad, Tiny Dancer, please.&quot;

So what can I do but shut my mouth and let Jimmy move over.

Yes, now that my kids are cool.

It's like somebody has completely re-codified my entire existence  
in a cosmic mind twist rivaled only by the evolution  
from relativity to quantum physics—

They look at me and I know what they're thinking  
&quot;Dad, did you really used to be cool. When?  
Back in some prehistoric epoch where people  
like that insecure caveman from the Geico commercial  
used to play chicken with saber-toothed tigers to prove their mettle&quot;

Yes, I know what they're thinking and I don't care.

Because, I...

yes me, their cool ass Dad,  
can recite the script to every  
EPIC RAP BATTLES OF HISTORY

Sara Palin VS. Lady Gaga

&quot;Oh boy look what we have here a transvestite with a keyboard trying to  
be freak of the year! &quot;

And to that the MIGHTY GAGA retorts,

&quot;You are the sum of everything I despise with the most dysfunctional  
family since the Jackson freakin 5!

Now that's cool. I mean really cooooooIIIIIIIIII!

But...

Why didn't I think of it?

Leo Briones

# Confessions

From the place that I now stand, I can only say,  
that I have turned my soul's muse away  
from the devices of modern poetry.  
For stories told that bring neither meaning  
nor the slow unfold of the rose pronouncing itself to spring,  
are definite and calculated, bead-by-bead, on the slow,  
dreadful abacus of the angst of our contemporary being.  
The continuity of the symbol and the metaphysical  
is a flow born of the winter's packed snow, down a watershed,  
to the seas of seven continents, to rise to streaming gases,  
and back to rain, to once again, flow across the river's of circling time—  
this as if our thoughts were born and born once more  
but in certainty never born at all. Truth is wolf and a paradox.  
It howls at the flirting moon and seldom is what it seems.  
In the new world it is rare, but wonderful,  
that poets, be they soft or masculine,  
can transcend their reflection and their fears—  
to confess the life sublime  
and seek the infinite,  
to confess the life sublime  
and seek the infinite.

Leo Briones

# Divorce Court

Pronounced like an alarm clock,  
'I'm leaving her today.'

No sense for lips to quiver  
or thoughts to quibble  
about what he has known—  
from the nausea of a young drunk  
to the stank breath of an old happy lush—  
known and tortured him like a sundial telling time  
across the granite tablet of his life.

And now that she is fat and bitter as juju beans  
and sleeps in the other room  
with her flat screen TV and sex toys—  
he enjoys scribbling thoughts on the moment;

and thinks of those lips, softer than air  
and thighs as smooth and sweet  
as rose pedal Panna Cotta.  
How they taste like freedom.

Crawled up in his 15-year old Camry  
with his old sweat stained pillow and tattered blanket,  
the San Francisco fog creeping in like a clever ghost—  
he's really, really cold.

He could slept inside at least for one more night  
but he couldn't stand the echo of that chill and tearful confession,

'I understand Dad. I just hope it's not this bad for me.'

Leo Briones

# Editorial Of The Absolute

Is it not enough  
to have walked so far,  
shrinking, hollow, stumbling  
to the edge.  
This sunken canyon,  
this precipice.

This.

For I can see  
in the sediment—

the silent masses of Auschwitz,  
the heaving stones of Intifada,  
the piled putrid bodies  
of the Valley of Ararat.

So I growl like  
a wild sheep dog,  
as if to say,

“The ancient wooden plank  
between my teeth  
is the vestige of Noah

and is it  
not enough  
that I brought you  
to this place? ”

Leo Briones

# Elegy To A Kurdish Father

Elegy to a Kurdish father  
for Ekim Erdogan

Alone in a green meadow I pray,  
not on my knees but hands held high.

I think of the Kurdish girl in the London fog—  
her Baba is gone, the night has come.

Behind the East End walls a bluesy soulful note.  
The cockney drink bitter beer, rattle and chat.

But she is not there, she is a continent away—

for the Sultans ruled from Constantinople to Budapest  
from Medina to Algiers—

and in the muscle of the coffee the tendons of kabobs  
there is a tone in her Baba's voice, a light in a dark green forest.

The tale of the Kardelen—

the Snowdrop, so shy, below the snow,  
knows the sun fingers will smother its breath—

so it hides, like the prized nuts of a brown squirrel,  
in the custody of winter's frozen soil.

Still, above ground,

the Snowdropp hears the wind of her lover's song—

she longs and longs then rises to her lover's strum  
but in a flash her petal's gone

Yet in that second, that moment  
when love was once again made new—

the girl, well beyond the fog and pub dwellers,

hears only her Baba's granite voice

revealed in the eternal romance of Kardelen  
sprouting toward Spring, love and valor.

Leo Briones

# Forecast

Today,  
I will be seen only  
as the shadow  
of the mountainside  
or the forest dirt  
below a deer's hooves.

For are the blossoms  
of the cherry tree  
greater than its bark  
or its bough more  
durable than its roots?

Time unfolds  
like a distant storm  
of thunder and flashes  
in the sky.  
Even though  
we smell the musky rain

we can never be sure  
when it will steep our  
cracked soil to bring  
the prosperity  
of burgeoning Spring.

Leo Briones

# I Am China

I am the forty-two year father of five from Raleigh, North Carolina. I stand in the unemployment line in denim overalls and a white t-shirt—shrimp and grits dripping from textile free chin.

I am Mao Zedong huddled among the farmers gathering wheat and rice as an act of vengeance. I descend from the well ridge of Jinggang Mountains one-million strong...over the hill and through the marble foyer of bourgeois arrogance, I have come to claim my ancient inheritance.

I am Confucius channeling the calm and pride of my ancestors...I stand upon the Great Wall and whisper the wise admonition of duty, performance, and obligation to my starving children, as they wait patiently for another bowl of egg dropp porridge and their father's acknowledgement.

I am Shanghai's traffic littered with Passats and Beetles, so vast they make me look like a commercial car lot...I am ten million pirated copies of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory exponentially making billions of Chinese boys and girls happy for the kindness of a blurry thrill.

I am the agrarian, the peasant, the industrial, the Marxist, the libertarian, the information revolution wrapped up in 1.4 billion dots of humanity. I am one fifth of the world gathering a capitalist inertia like Adam Smith invisible hand. I shake the foundation. I shake the foundation. I am China.

I am the boomerang effect of The Great Leap Forward slapping the Theory of Productive

Forces in face like a drunken sailor smacking a cheap whore. The fastest rise to economic might in the history of humankind. I am the entrepreneurial hordes of all the world; Dane, Swede, Japanese, Taiwanese, Spaniard, American all sprinting like love sick teenagers to copulate with my commerce.

I am lost orphan girls of China wandering the countryside in search validity. I am the lost girls of China buried in garbage heaps and the streets of Beijing like mangy Pekingese. I am the resentment of a patriarchal society regulated to one.

I am the Sino-Tibetan tongue of the Tao. I am Mandarin, Shanghainese, Cantonese, Min, Xiang, Gan, and Hakka. I am the ancient people and their dynasties. I am the mythical reality of Xia, the feudal Shang, the invading Zhou, I am the unity and legalism of Qin. I am the majesty and the finality of the Qing.

I am the sewer of clothes for Prada, the stitcher of shoes for Nike, the maker of toys for Mattel and the Great Capital Leap Forward birthing more TVs, DVD players, cell phones from the walls of my capitalist womb than any other nation on earth. I am the maker of parts for Boeing 757 and neophyte explorer of space with rockets launching on my ancient soil.

I am the slow bend of the Whang Phou river meandering through Shanghai like floating space ship. I am the twenty-five dollar a day high-rise worker building the new world.

I am Chiang Kai-shek serving my people to bring modernism and democracy. I am the generalissimo of all of Chinese; too weak to govern but too strong to be overthrown. I am Chiang Kai-shek with the dragons breath of Mao Tse Teng burning my ass as I swim the China Sea to Taiwan.

I am the people's army strategically pounding our pots and pans from hill to hill as we purge China of the pesky sparrow, rat, and mosquito. I am the famine of the great leap backward killing tens of millions for the fulfillment of Mao's madness.

I am Deng Xiaoping conquer of Chiang Kai-shek. I am Deng Xiaoping scrutinizer of Mao Zedong. I am the father of The Four Modernizations of socialism with Chinese characteristics. I am the free market entrepreneur and the bloody students of Tiananmen square.

I am the plastic numbers hanging on a sign at the local gas station reading two dollars and eighty cents a gallon on the signs of Mobile and Shell from Los Angeles to New York City. I am the dragons demand for black gold. I am Wall Street falling like a cliff diver off the Acapulco coast. I am the Yuan indexed against the dollar. When I fly, you fly. When I crash, you crash.

I am one-hundred and sixty cities with populations of one million or more. I am seven of the ten most polluted cities on earth. I spew the brown and soot of NOX. SOX and particulates to fuel global warming in way that makes Chief Seattle cry and Al Gore's ears steam.

I am Yao Ming. The Houston Rocket. The pride of Shanghai. Seven feet six inches with a set shot like Jerry West and a dunk like a Yangtze thunder storm.

I am one fifth of human kind. A massive mall of human consumers that is being wooed like prospective lovers by every fortunate five hundred lustful capitalists

of the world. I have twelve red roses signed by Disney, GE, Nokia, Microsoft, City Bank, Toyota.

I am the crouching tiger, the hidden dragon of Whoba province. The breadbasket of China three gorges long. I am the six hundred foot high and three-hundred and fifty miles long expanse of dammed environmental degradation that will displace more than a one point three million people.

I am the great sucking sound. The slayer of union jobs, of pension, of work place dignity. I am the big-eared Texan telling my fellow Americans, "This is Ross Perot and need to let you know, I told you so. I told you so. You know Ross was right because I told you so."

I am the twenty-five dollar a day Mexicana maquila worker being replaced by the twenty-five dollar a month eighteen year-old Whong Jou factory worker.

I am the fine Christmas toys of Guttenberg and Munich. St. Nicholas, the reindeers, the Christmas village made with pride and precious. Made in the high standard of our Germanic pride. I am these fine toys, I am these fine toys. All made in China.

I am Karl Marx flipped like a moo shui pancake, the eighteen farmers of Whang Jou pissing on the grave of Mao Zedong. Selling boc choy, soy beans, water chestnuts, green beans at our ancient markets and spreading the wealth the peasant classes.

I am the spoiled nuevo rich kids of Shanghai cruising under my high rise sur-reality, I am the sex girls of Shanghai cruising karaoke bars a big as football stadiums.

I am half of China's wealth buried in tin cans, stashed behind stonewalls, stuffed in the stitches of cheap mattresses. I am the vendors of Beijing, Shanghai, Yang Jo pitching chotchkys and Buddas in a desperate attempt to jump from abject poverty to just desperate poor.

I am the working girls of Shun Gen living twelve to a room, working seven days and seventy hours a week until finally I can take it no more. So I spread my legs for prosperity, sing Karaoke, smell the bad breathe old crusty foreigners and then with more Yuan than I could ever image I return to my village hoping for hope of matrimony.

I am the Fulang Gong disciple meditating in the village square for peace,

temperance and tolerance. I am the Fulang Gong conscience of China  
proclaiming that the human being is more important than hurried prosperity. I  
am the students of Tein a Mein Square crying freedom in front a red army tank.

I am your faucet, your carpet, your shower head, your bamboo floor, your TV,  
your blow dryer, your razor, your cell phone, your paper towels, your plastic  
spoons...watch your label, watch your label...watch me I am China.

I am the forbidden city, I am the forbidden city resurrected.  
I am the spirit of my ancestors, I am the spirit of my ancestors manifested.  
I am the ancient, I am the ancient, the ancient made anew.

Wo shi zhong guo,  
I am China  
Wo hui lai,  
I have return  
Wo shi zhong guo,  
I am China  
Huan ying wo  
Welcome me

Leo Briones

# Illegal

I cleaned until the windows sparkled,  
now everyone can see  
how blue the ocean is at Crystal Cove.  
I made sure the jardinero cut  
the St. Augustine between the steps.

I remember when Justinsito  
tripped on that grass and scraped his knee.  
He cried an hour until the stinging  
stopped, then another hour when  
we couldn't find you after your tennis lesson.

I cut the potatoes and tossed  
them in the tomato broth  
to make your favorite caldo de queso

I still can't believe you wrote that check;  
SOS (Save our State) Stop those illegals  
from infecting OUR society.  
\$2,500. More than I make in two months.

I nick my finger on the six-inch Henkels,  
so sharp it could cut granite. I bleed  
all over the Mondrian cutting board

think I could use that knife to slice your throat.  
But I could never do such a thing, dios perdoname.  
After all, if I ever had to leave who would tidy up  
around here or tuck Justinsito in at night?

Leo Briones

# Indulgences

For Father's Day  
the kids bought me  
an old bass drum,  
about three feet around.

The hoops, fading brass.  
The tension rods and lugs, worn pewter.  
The drum shell, antique and rubbed cinnamon.  
The batter drum, a shabby seashell.

"It reminds me of you Dad",  
they say perfectly earnest.

I immediately  
turn this drum on it's side,  
roll in a round piece of glass that  
has been waiting in the garage for years.  
I polish the glass then place it flat on top of the drum.

From the wine cellar I bring a bottle  
of 2002 Silver Oak Cabernet Sauvignon  
cork it and let it sit for two hours.

When I return,  
the kids are long asleep,  
a single crystal wine glass, made  
in Bohemia during the Cold War,  
sits alone on the table.

I pour the cab, smell it's bouquet —

then lightly tap the drum's shell with my foot  
to make the sound of tiny thunder.

Leo Briones

# Interpretation Of A Prophet's Dream

The gentle gentleman  
loved to so say reconcile not revile.

The evil evil man  
loved to throw  
nitroglycerin in the log fire  
of amnesty and humility.

This is the way it is and shall always be—  
until the very end of time,  
if in fact there is an end of time.

For if there is not  
let us toss war's black and bloody flag  
into the boiling cauldron of nothingness.

And if be that in eschatology —  
the sword shall slash,  
the drone shall drone,  
the fire shall at once exhaust

then all at once mankind will see  
a field of forever lilies behind an old oak tree.

Leo Briones

# Kismet

As the crumble of quartz rises to summits,  
and the silver sword of certainty  
is melted in the alchemist stew,  
the whirlwind will swallow our Babel.

And we, soldiers home from war  
hear the cacophony of our every brutality  
alive and dead in rocks and tissue.

In the faded fog of sun,  
we cast and chisel the lore  
of stubborn memory

still, tremble like a rat  
caught in the cobra's glare.

Leo Briones

# La Passion De L'Apocalypse

"When you expect the world to end at any moment, you know there is no need to hurry. You take your time, you do your work well." ? Thomas Merton

And then quick silver in the sky—  
he walked before those clouds. He could not catch them  
only see as one sees when it is overcast—  
eyes squinting in the clever, piercing glare of gray.

To be sure there is something naked and credulous about the truth—  
that chill of wind haunts the body, that ghost deep in the wounds of the bones.

When there is no marrow to sucked, no table of minerals and amino acids  
to be swallowed from the chalice of days—  
it is at that moment you know there is only sweat to flesh,  
teeth to silken lips and human claw to spin and scapula.

I explode like a tornado that holds on  
even as the rope's last string flays to its final resting place.

My clamor slowly dissolves from moans to crystal,  
"This started long ago and will not end, now that it is ending."

Leo Briones

# Legally High

with acknowledgements to Sharon Lloyd Mc Cracken

On Venice Beach  
the people's restroom  
is smeared with the people's dung,  
pigeon's coo in mass like Mao's Red Army,  
all below a flashy sky and a few crumbs  
of late Spring clouds.

A rainbow of skulls—  
emerald, scarlet, azure and jade—  
line this boardwalk.  
Jeans well below his ass,  
a bling Jesus across his chest  
a fifteen plus something kid hustles quarters and dollar bills  
Eminem-style from avant-garde strangers.

Marijuana for medicine everywhere,  
eyes as vague as kettle corn  
wander back-and-forth  
from roller blade princes  
to spiked haired teens  
with more piercings than Cleopatra.

A man wearing ebony leather  
across his face and hands has no address  
but a dusty sleeping bag and plastic tarp.  
He takes claim on a leggy southern belle  
in a short denim skirt,  
"I'm a good suntan spreader doll."  
The woman smiles her polite southern smile,  
gulps a diet coke in a Wacky Wok cup  
to avoid an indignant sigh,  
turns to her husband,  
"Bless his heart, now bless his heart."

Mouth agape Suere's Voxal 2000  
is rust and steel. Is this modern curiosity

outraged by this pageant or something quite different?

Are the women who shine in sculpted work out gear  
and run back and forth between metal slatted trash cans  
like metallic ping pong balls  
perfect sacrifices to the god of pagan lust and joy?

Like a mini-tour de France  
ruby, sapphire and emerald cruisers  
whiz north in search of sweet butter toffee  
coffee houses arranged with care.  
Santa Monica seems a sanctuary  
for the hip, toned and sculpted  
couples who hear the piper's melody.

A cowabunga crowd gathers  
in search of the eternal Wednesday,  
surfers slide and slip across ten-foot waves.  
The curious snap their Blackberries and I-phones  
to remember:  
how extreme the surfers are,  
how dull are the shells,  
how salty is the seaweed,  
how comfortable the trash.

They are wrapped like seals  
in black coats to shield themselves  
from the afternoon breeze.

As for me?

I sit butt naked on a blanket,  
not twenty feet from the Pacific's edge.  
Only five feet from me  
a sleeping junky sprawled  
like a pale mannequin on the beach.  
A tattoo of a fire truck  
and obscures his track marks.  
He wakes for a second and touches his nose,  
babbles something about being on the edge,  
laughs like a mocking bird,  
and returns to his poppy dreamland.

A gray-haired man  
with peach droopy shorts,  
skinny legs and beer belly  
plays metal detector lottery in the sand.

Defiant,  
I vow only to remember

the barnacles, □  
the urchins

and the seagulls  
of the jetty  
who live and hunt  
with each tug and pull of the waves.

Still,  
I hear the static  
of an overdrive pedal  
that distorts with heathen mettle

then

somewhere on the wind  
the strum of a wandering troubadour  
who plays an old Dylan song  
I can't quite peg

but for a second sounds

a little bit like God.

Leo Briones

# Ode To Contradictions

The passion of nothingness,  
the mad convulsion of the first kiss,  
the fleece touch of making love,  
the chaos of peace,  
the stillness of war.  
We the children of Rousseau  
born to perfect reason,  
or  
Voltaire's progeny  
inspired to this Romantic season,  
or C.S. Lewis teaching us  
to kill  
Freud with a slip;  
Does this all lead to  
far and near  
a pause and  
a spin,  
like Jesus under a fig tree,  
or Buddha dying for selfless love.  
Life contradicts itself  
then finds the parallel  
scales of reason—  
through it all  
as young men die  
and veterans are made immortal—  
our light does spark  
and meets the raven,  
as we put pad to pen.  
Inspired.  
Yet, perhaps as innocent  
as treason.

Leo Briones

# Proclamation

for Sofia Luz

On the day that you were born —  
a husk dry wind blew across the LA sky.  
In the Valley women spread chap-stick across their lips.  
At a Farmer's Market near Paradise Canyon people chatted  
about fire weather and all the pollen in the air.  
At Chevron Ravine, a little man who threw snake oil in the burning pyre  
of Dodger blue, finally had enough and gave it all back.  
In the Ukraine peasants and merchants braved an early cold  
to protest for of a better world and the perestroika of the heart.  
Outside the hospital, a man in a wheelchair told me I had a happy smile.  
On the day that you were born there were no brushfires,  
people returned home and cooked organic yellow squash,  
DJ's pronounced Dodger blue meant more than dollars and cents,  
the world cooled from a long hot Arab Spring,  
a bumble bee pollinated a sun flower,  
and I understood exactly what the man in the wheelchair meant.

Leo Briones

# Radio Free Russia

If there is such a thing as Glasnost  
for fingers pecking a column left headline

or Perestroika for the beet farmer  
who wakes before the rooster  
and falls asleep to a vodka moon

then how can we explain

Svetlana:

In leather boots and hot pants.  
Hair as blond as wheat, eyes as blue  
as cobalt, curves like naked bronze—

only twenty grand  
and she's yours?

This all leads one  
to think if Tolstoy wrote  
Master and Man version 2.0

Would Vasili  
save Svetlana from this  
blizzard of human cupidity?

Leo Briones

# Reasons To Know The End Of The World Is Near

Because on the drying plains of Africa,  
the eldest warrior sings  
of cow's blood mixed with goat's milk  
fermented in a golden urn,

because the daisy chain of Wall Street  
and Nikkei is being overthrown  
by the New Delhi street merchant  
who can barely spell his name,

because the queen of harlots and whores  
has changed her pledge  
and instead can be found  
in a tin village feeding the poor,

because the tow-headed  
haughty boys  
no longer respect  
their daddies or their moms,

because on the silk string of death  
the black widow weaves a final web,  
and the hooting of the northern spotted owl  
can no longer be heard in the old sleepy forest.

For after stars  
shimmer and shine  
they will explode  
and then collapse

to form a new world forged  
of a new sky  
and a new dirt.

Leo Briones

# Restate

I am no longer  
a poet of this generation —  
refuse to chisel worn stone,  
look into the shadow  
of a numb and star empty night  
and hold hands with thirsty fat jackals.

For black boots and brown shirts  
are a fashion beyond my means  
and collusion with old or new media  
is a means in which I hear  
no answer.

I have walked among the poor  
in humid tropical shanties  
and dry corrugated spreads.

What a glorious sense  
to know their hunger,  
to understand their rage—

fist held high and proud  
in a rhythmic motion  
of guerilla defiance  
and the street cool sensation  
of love and hate  
in the same ferocious scream.

It is impossible to lower your shoulder  
and use only foxhole courage and leg drive  
to pummel these walls,

walls of old Rome  
and electronic Berlin,  
walls of skull strewn Phenom Penh  
and curvaceous Moscow  
walls of the talon tearing, flesh eating  
conquering American eagle,

walls pounded

from Congolese uranium and copper  
on this river of darkness in the shadow  
of barbarous colonial intent,

river of winds that blow nowhere,  
river of wandering currents,  
river of passion without purpose,  
river of want without glory,  
river that neither begins nor ends,  
river with no kingdom—

in that river,  
I shall not drown.  
Of that history,  
I am not a poet.

Leo Briones

# Romancing Poverty

When all the women  
on their way to Africa  
to give oatmeal  
cookies  
and granola bars  
to the poor  
have shaved heads,  
you have to wonder—  
does poverty make you blind,  
fail to see beauty in pomegranate lips,  
the pouring of auburn curls, or sea green eyes?  
Oh! what an ode it will be,  
what a turn of the lock and key,  
when the cover of National Geographic reads,  
“Masai boys discover beauty in silken thighs.”

Leo Briones

## Rosa Parks (1913-2005)

She was  
a little woman,  
not really built for this;  
and the secret is she  
really didn't mind.  
After all, the rear  
seats were firm  
much better  
on a back  
sore from  
all her sewing.  
But that day,  
her hands ached,  
her ankles swollen,  
and the back of that bus  
looked so far away.  
So when that ole' boy  
said, "Move, "  
she reached over  
and opened the window,  
gave a holler that scared  
a murder of crows  
off the branches of  
a long leaf pine—  
funny thing is,  
them black crows  
never came back again.

Leo Briones

# Saved

I was born  
with a propensity  
to confess.  
I always felt  
that a curse,  
until one day,  
I spilled blood  
all over the grotto  
and some clever sojourner  
put it in a chalice,  
gave a toast  
to second chances,  
then sewed my heart  
with golden thread  
and it started beating again.

Leo Briones

## Sofia Like A Poem

You bounce on my knee,  
ever so slightly.

Your Mommy reaches down  
ten inches from your face,

in Spanish says,  
'¿Que haces mi, bon bon? '

Like some animated cartoon cat  
you meow a high-pitched baby cackle

and then again and again,  
'ah-kah-ah-kah. ooh, gooh, ga-ka.'

One day I will try to tell of this  
tiny rapture of my heart—

of you and your bubbling,  
budding sounds,

But in truth,

words are but the pretense  
of moments and memory.

So, I saved it here

in the petrified  
wood of poetry.

Leo Briones

# Song For The Next Decade

On this eve of eruptions and windmills,  
we have been gathered, as you will,  
the prophets of the unknown  
in storehouses and oil-caked alleys.  
The blood of cows and lambs fill our empty bellies,  
dirty syringes coated in high balls and heroin  
are symbols of our American heartbreak.

After all,  
were we not promised more than this  
land ruled by Wall Street gentry  
and huck-and-shuck K Streeters  
who fix their ties and pull their collars  
as Nero fiddles and Tea Partiers sip?

Sing homage to the era of change.

Hope grows on narrow highways and wide-open sky.  
The people march to the mall.  
They're welcomed by Lincoln shining in his temple,  
cry out that he slay the moneychangers  
and the bill chasers from the foundation of this new earth—  
to once again free the slaves before lilacs bloom in the fields.

All that is left for me to say  
sing loud brother, sing loud sister  
hold my hand, write my poem, say my truth,  
smear my lies, love what I love, prophecy what I prophecy

hold in your hand the alabaster shell of ages,  
smash it to raw pulp, mixed with sweat and blood  
of that which has past and which will unfold  
from the womb of uncertain suffering to something  
like grace of life, gentle monarchs of the breeze;  
orange and black, in perfect flight.

Leo Briones

# Summit

Beyond the azure stir,  
the olive whisper,  
the pewter echo—  
I stand naked flesh to frozen wind  
on the precipice between  
that which rots to earth—  
infant of grass,  
mother of granite,  
matriarch of dirt—  
and that which is the melody of memory—  
to snap the flat snare,  
to boom the fat bass drum  
to hum the swirling refrain—  
to remember  
death before the middle time  
and your dying body,  
black bone and flesh to slow steps,  
Who is the father of the new age?  
Who is the mother that nurtures lava and mud alike?  
And here waiting, knowing  
that time is like palm pulp on the wind  
paste to dust  
to the end of time  
and seed again—  
we are waterless bones gathered  
in hollow caverns and tidy cemeteries.  
But on what gale shall the spirit soar,  
to what mighty kingdom shall we gather?  
River of sparkling life,  
pearl streets to prove the awakening.

Leo Briones

# Ten Years

for Q

And it just passed—  
no spectacular procession  
of mule driven carriages,  
no sunglow gold of celestial thunder,  
no trumpet blare across galaxies.  
Your meteor didn't land on Kalmia Street  
in the front lawn of the three-bedroom home  
stuffed into 750 ghetto square feet.  
The one the Mexican family bought after you left.  
They finally did that remodel you never talked about;  
but everyone knew you longed for but just couldn't afford.

Still, I have to say  
something ten years after your glory—  
how us simple carbon flesh units,  
with a not so simple spirit formed souls. How we still suffer.  
So I pain to tell you in my thoughts that Burns, the one who directed  
"The Civil War" documentary you liked so much,  
the film with that ole' Mississippi historian slow drawling to poetry  
about how Lincoln lifted his body above conventional world like a guru,  
so the American character could arch toward freedom. Namaste!  
I remember you always funny as you mocked that truth,  
"Ifin ohnly me mahster be liken im."  
Now, that just makes me wonder  
if death is a comedy or a drama. Or just that moment  
the equation seems so simple as to be easy.

Burns latest project is something  
more for General Audiences  
BUT WITH EVER SO INTENSE WARNING LABEL—  
drags a wooden wagon across the twisted,  
roots protruding from earth,  
jagged rock strewn road we call cancer.  
"The Mother of all Maladies" they say.  
It swells my eyes, streams blood so fast  
into the valves of my heart I can hear the hiss.  
I have lost my breath, but I still need to say—

"Those oncologist. The ones who haven't walk away,  
whose cemetery of patients hasn't  
lopped into the gyre of the unbearable,  
the ones who accept the friendship and then the death.  
Those ones are giddy, childlike."  
"On the brink, on the very brink", they say.  
"Maybe another ten years and this cellular holocaust ends."  
Maybe then? Maybe in ten more years?  
I call upon the sunglow gold of celestial thunder

Leo Briones

# The Augury In The Twilight

from my window  
the shadows of the melaleuca tree,  
the smolder of dusk,

the spice of sweat and jasmine oil,  
a reminder of a lover's ghost,  
I hold my breath—

smothered by the night's freight,  
wonder about the death  
of contour, of flame, of light.

Leo Briones

# The Beloved Revolution

I was present at the greatest social revolution  
since Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to the conscience of America  
at the mall in Washington D.C.

I was there when the Crips and Bloods  
put their guns on a picnic table and said,  
"We're with you. The war is over.  
Let's live The Beloved Community."

I heard the hum spread out across your sacred Watts,  
like an exaltation of monarch butterflies  
gently proclaiming in the sky,  
"Peace has finally come."

I was there when you spoke,  
your black rage roaring,  
"No more poverty pimps  
or hustler preachers.  
No more relying  
on the guilt of white liberals to feed our families.  
No more burn, just earn,  
no more complain, just overcome the pain,  
no more death, just life and life lived well."

I listened as the choir sang along  
and loved you so, when  
"Free at last" started to finally make sense  
as angels gathered for a feast  
of tender brisket and smothered rice.

You moved slowly before the people,  
prepared for your speech,  
but instead walked about the crowd,  
spread hugs among the chosen.

I was there when the guru of oncology  
gave you that nervous look:  
therapy needed to start yesterday.  
Like a screaming bullet on a late Memphis afternoon—

crooked cells make their moves, attack and feed.  
You just nodded your head and whispered,  
“We shall overcome.”

I took the journey with you.  
I walked and walked and  
when you could walk no more,  
I lifted you from your throne of therapy  
and watched you squeeze one last dropp  
of hope from your molasses urine.

I was there when the boys from the neighborhood  
walked into the Gethsemane of your hospital room.  
With the indignation of an Old Testament prophet  
you asked the women to leave.  
They were all there—OD, Heron, Vince, Noodle,  
Brother Wallace, Monk, Kelvin.  
Some good, and some very, very bad.

I saw you rise like a mystic revealed  
from your numinous cave and declare,  
“You are my boys. I have known you longer  
than anyone on this earth.  
All of us understand how special Watts love is.  
We also all know the heinous things  
that some of us have done—  
slanging dope, pimping ho’s,  
killing niggaz because they looked at us wrong.  
I never did those things. But neither am I here to judge you.”

I was witness to the faces of your street apostles  
looking deep into your heart,  
sensing somewhere, in the watershed of time  
spreading from the alluvial residue  
of blood and pewter tears,  
that this moment would never be again.

I saw you rise  
this time to draw the circle of your life  
in a perfect concentric absolving second.  
“I have seen beyond this world.  
And I know I am going to heaven.

I will soon be a free man.  
I never thought I would have to die  
to return to Africa.  
But it is arrogant for us to believe in God  
and not accept our destiny.  
I will part this life soon and I can only plead  
that each of you take care of your family,  
love your wife and children,  
do not put work before them,  
do not put partying before them,  
you are grown men now  
and I need you to act like it  
because I need you in paradise with me.”

I saw the prophet’s brother open up  
the golden bag of redeeming love.  
I saw the heart of hardened men walk up  
and put tithes into that gleaming bag—  
tithes of silver guns, green bags of dope,  
white rocks of crack cocaine, bottles of purple Ripple,  
sixteen ounce cans of yellow Schlitz malt liquor—  
of red anger, of gray abandonment, of black discontent.  
Soul by soul they file by you, kissing your ashen cheek,  
professing their forever love.

Then, as if the Roman soldiers  
sent by the Sadducees entered the room,  
you are gone and  
they are left to their destinies.

I was there as pilgrims gathered  
behind your pine casket.

I heard the bugle burst,  
The Saints Come Marching In.

I listened as your eleventh grade teacher let us know  
you lived The Beloved Community.

I saw your children cry  
and tried to cup their tears.

I looked from the hill of your resting place  
and saw a perfect view of the Watts towers,  
which your gravestone will forever see.

I rose and declared you a prophet for this age  
and begged that others would understand.

I saw the final spade scoop packed  
that laid you to peace.

I felt the beating pulse from the final breath.

Oh yes, I was present at the greatest social revolution  
since Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to the conscience of America  
at the mall in Washington D.C

(to Q)

Leo Briones

# The Blues In The Delta Breeze

(Delta) water, mostly runoff from mountain snowpack, flows through a web of channels to mammoth pumps in the southern delta, sending billions of gallons of water to 25 million Californians.

Sacramento Bee 2009

I.

On a clear day  
in site of the Golden Gate,  
twenty-five miles off the coast  
of the Fabled City, separated  
by the deep murky blue  
and rolling foamy swells,  
a small out-cropping of craggily isles  
Drake's Islands of St. James,  
the mysterious Farallones.

There  
every October  
off its rocky shores  
and in its myrtle green lagoons,  
Great White sharks gather  
to feast on Stellar sea lions and Northern fur seals—  
an annual ritual of want and blood.

It is said that when these Great Whites feed  
they are roused to such a frenzy  
that their bodies bounce like quicksilver from the sea,  
in the same motion as that volcanic convulsion of hunger  
rows of triangular razor teeth clutch their prey  
and the ocean turns cinnabar red.

As they thrust from the sea;  
their eyes roll into their sockets  
to become two tiny beads of pure white.  
There is an ole' fisherman's legend that swears,  
that on the rare day that the sun shines  
through the Pacific gloom  
and reflects off those colorless beads,  
that one can catch the very glare

of Lucifer as St. Michael cast him into the fiery pit.

Twenty miles behind the shore in the Fabled City—  
high rises lift open palms to the Pacific Rim,  
vomit and syringes swarm the Tenderloin,  
proud descendants of the Romans and Celts  
hide behind the picket fences of the Sunset,  
leather boys strut the Castro humming freedom,  
tourist cross the Golden Gate in search of the western-most dream.

II.

But it has not always been like this  
10,000 years ago before the earth last melted,  
the Farallones formed the cold coastline of the Pacific  
and the Fabled City was but a depression of sand and grass.  
Nearly all year long powerful gusts swept sand—  
from the sea to the valleys—as miles and miles  
of frigid dunes formed far, far inland.

Then slowly  
the sun warmed to an epoch  
of eternal Spring on California's north coast.  
As the ice melted, the Farallones drifted into a rocky mystery,  
the Fabled City became the thumb of the Pacific  
and furious salt water chiseled the San Francisco Bay.

Inland  
the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers  
roared and merged to form the great Sacramento Delta.  
Meandering waterways of slough and marsh,  
of sandhill cranes, waterfowl, and raptor.  
For thousands of years,  
in this resplendent kingdom  
of the natural world— bear and elk, deer and beaver,  
fox and possum wandered the Tully fog and peat mashes  
in search of Salmon and the tender spouts of Spring.

III.

Then one-day  
people came,  
first Miwok and Yokut  
then, it is said, ancient Chinese wanders.  
Land for man they lived like a melody,  
unbroken chain of life—  
until the settlers arrived; manifest and heartened  
leather Forty-Niner and denim farmer.

Slowly they drained the peat marshes  
to form islands named after themselves—  
Sherman and Brannon, Bethel and Woodward—  
then erected levees to make strict waterways.

Soon the grizzly bear and mule deer  
retreated to the Sierra Nevada,  
the land was plowed and tilled and sowed  
to become bread mother of the earth;  
rice and alfalfa, walnut and pear.

All along in this Golden State  
of innovators and speculators,  
of growers and growth merchants—  
cities grew and suburbs sprawled.

To fulfill this want of prosperity  
and enchain and clutch delta streams  
modern wonders of the world were built—  
Great dams named Oroville and Shasta,  
massive steel pumps that sucked water  
to the fields of the mighty San Joaquin Valley  
and south to the Shadow Motherland of fortune and modernity—  
bear and deer retreated further and further  
to the valleys and peaks of the snowy Sierras.

IV.

Along the narrow winding roads  
that circle and twist the delta like a tangle of wire  
some the world greatest engineers travel in big tour buses.  
With a black microphone in hand  
they obscure into talk of turbidity and salinization,

explain to jittery farmers and impatient developers  
that the piper is calling his golden children home  
and the tiny endangered Delta Smelt, no bigger  
than the palm of your hand is the great narrator of this tale.

In a junction  
between north and south the tourist bus stops.  
The travelers walk into an open field  
where Bovine cattle graze and a slow delta breeze  
keeps the morning chill in the air.

This small herd of humanity  
moves toward a wood and barb wire fence.  
A woman complains that she should  
have worn pants, as she is cold in her pinned stripped skirt.  
Another man looking awkward in a fleece pullover,  
denim jeans, and cowboy boots leans on the fence.  
He asks, "The land looks odd. Sort of like rolling..."

The engineer like a smug professor  
interrupts the man in mid-sentence,  
"...like sandy dunes. Yes, that exactly what they are.  
you see 10,000 years ago at the end of the last Ice Age  
when the Farallon Islands were actually the shoreline  
of the Pacific and San Francisco was a valley...  
sand blew across the delta and formed...."  
He goes on and on.

But soon the travelers are not listening.  
Another cold Delta breeze gusts through them  
and brings a still silence and then a voice on the air,  
as if to say Great White or sandy dune,  
I was here before you walked two-legged and erect.  
I will be here long after you cease.

V.

There is a great white dome that hovers  
over the southern entry of California's Capitol.  
On the walls of the staircases portraits  
of California Governors: Pioneers and 49ers,

screen actors, reformers and statesmen,  
forward thinkers and forgers of movements. Peter Hardeman Burnett,  
Pat and Jerry Brown, Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger,  
Hiram Johnson and Earl Warren.

What has been chiseled in their homage  
and what shall said of future generations of the powerful—  
rides like an primeval reminder on the coastal tides  
and Sierra watersheds that ebb and flow  
on the great fanning Sacramento Delta:  
Aquarius bearing water to quench a thirst—  
both ancient and modern.

Leo Briones

# The Church Of The Valentine

I.

From the very distance of my soul fathomless like the sea but sad like the dry creek embedded between the desert's rolling dunes,

I have risen here to place my light upon the bright and shining hill of the fertile peace and noble solitude of my finest days. And, here I stand.

My stale wonder is the constant struggle of this life as I pull the unbearable cart of untenable memory.

This evokes a haunting and broken certainty because I also remember the load lifted from the heart of a defeated man.

It is a memory of walking on cold wet sand, my feet are blistered, bruised with the exhilaration of nature bound to man.

You are walking beside me, with me, through me—the hollow melancholy of your eyes and the careful pride of your fear has faded now. There is left only the polished seed of a lover's astonishment.

My spirit is stark, naked before you; but I feel neither the shame of Eden's curse nor the unbearable vanity of manliness.

Indeed, I am neither man nor woman, Greek nor Jew. I speak rather as the affable spirit of a pleasant memory.

You tell me like your father before me, I am big and hearty. Full of the exceptional appreciation which is the recognition of the exact genus of your seed.

I see your sadness. So, I am careful. I smile with exactness into the heart of you like a proud parent whose child has fulfilled the ambition of expectations.

I think of making love with you. But only to your eyes— vivid and distant— forlorn yet kind, they are portals.

So I enter. I seek only to find the passion of your ancestors; embedded in a heart —redder than a rose— in dream brighter than the spotlight of this frozen insanity, and I am crazed.

II.

I am a Roman soldier off to war believing that the fight is not worth the glory. I reject "Claudius The Mean" and his cruel ways. I seek sanctuary.

There is a church I have never called home. But it has always called to me. Its prophet is dressed in the pure white robes of chastity. Yet, he believes in an ardent grueling love.

I tell him I am running. My purpose is resolute. I seek the heart. Kindness. The sensual grasp of our first hug. I seek white linen. A hand sworn to eternity. To make love to her brown eyes— again and again and once again.

He has seen this before. But tells me there is something different. He anoints me with mirth and frankincense. I tell him I am willing to take this to my grave.

He encourages me. It is not the age to hide your face in shame. One day soon love will rule the world. But that is for our children to see. Today, we must suffer.

I walk toward the lion's den. He continues to request longsuffering. I look for you in the crowd among the festival of Latifunda slavery, merchants and prostitutes. They are not you.

I tell him of our innocent love—furtive glances and holding hands. Of the beach and blistering sand. He holds a talisman in his hand. It is the polished seed of your kindness.

I am rising now. My heart seeks the refuge and hope of memory. I hold the talisman to my face. I breathe deeply in search of you. I seek to be anointed by your oil.

This is the last theater. The crowd is lurching. They sway back and forth frenzied by the rhythm of blood. Suddenly there is a terrible weeping. For even they notice who has come.

All their hands are bloody now. My heart bleeds your memory. I rise and look to place my light on the shining hill. But I am subjugated, bent to the knee. Saint Valentine is next to me. He leans and whispers that there is no death only the crucifixion of our love.

We here before all time recognize the representation of this sharp and bloody

blade. It saves our pain. And for one moment we can see our head sliced from the empty shell of what remains.

Spirits float and soar on time. The oneness of our contemplation fades between the three layers of the God in me. There is a certain glory here that I have always known. My father and mother lay their hands on me to welcome me home.

I am wearing a white robe. I look just like him. He encourages peace. I understand. Still my life was only gratifying a moment at a time. I maintain the sadness of memory. A sadness that is really quite simply a question—I have died for her, will she die for me?

I wait to see.

Leo Briones

# The Kingdom Of Heaven

You kept looking—  
at the coffee shop next to your cinnamon mocha,  
behind the flashing red light on your Blackberry,  
perhaps hidden in magic ink on one of your latest diplomas.

You asked Father about this mystery.  
He grabbed your index finger and placed in the Eucharist chalice.  
You got startled by the sensation of the cold red wine,  
frustrated when Father wouldn't tell you what it meant.

You called your friend with the PHD in astronomy.  
He spent two hours preaching about  
super novas, white dwarfs, and black holes.

You couldn't believe it was anything like that,  
and just when you thought you couldn't take it any more—  
you remembered your first love  
and crashing foam on the shell-pulped shore.

So that night,  
you sought him  
like the Oroboros seeks infinity,  
wrapped yourself in the sand,  
naked as an exposed mussel shell.

You hear his soft groan,  
his fingers pinch your nipples,  
his breath bequeaths his eternal heart,  
whispers, whispers—

"We will never be more in love than now."

Leo Briones

# The Truth About Rock And Roll

I purposely slip into the state I call cave dwelling.  
Simplify by hiding behind the blue speaker on my desk.  
I conjure my inner renegades—  
The Who screams, "We won't get fooled again."  
I twist the tuner because that's as cynical  
as any love song I've ever heard,  
maybe Johnny Cash all in black,  
as honest as a man can be about,  
'The Beast in Me' is the spin I'm looking for.  
Still, I like the pounding of the woofer:  
boom, boom, boom.  
"To all the girl I loved before, " I twirl baton-like,  
not sure I like Julio mocking me.  
Then like the thin breeze in the full sun  
it sneaks up on me—  
behind the big black wire, static electricity everywhere,  
"Yahweh, Yahweh  
Always pain before a child is born."  
I'm not ready to crawl out into the neon light.  
But that's more like it.

Leo Briones

# Therapy

I walk Divesadero  
between Lombard and Broadway—  
it's steep and straight  
and takes some time to navigate.  
All this walking makes me think—  
it has been some time now.  
I don't hope for emails  
or check my cell phone anymore,  
only remember a time when  
overlooking the Pacific  
I read to you and we wandered  
through the timelessness of poets.  
You said, "That's like Neruda and  
sometimes Borges or Ruben Dario, "  
but mostly, "That one is you, so very you."  
And you smiled yourself to sleep.  
I always woke you (although I never wanted to) .  
I had to return to my home of obligation.  
And you returned to your home  
of prisms and paintings  
and the nothingness of suffering.  
I'd drop you off and you'd call me as I drove home,  
politely excuse yourself,  
"I just wanted to see if you're driving safely."  
So we'd chat again refusing to forget  
the merging timbre of our voices.  
Then one day without warning  
you proclaimed we would always be  
forever locked in the mind's embrace  
that knows no time, no space.  
Hallelujah! Glory Be!  
What a cliché it is to believe  
only that which doesn't sting,  
to think the swarm of bees  
in their hive produce simply honey.  
Still I waited. I waited by the sand,  
by the sea, to ask you to swim with me.  
But tides rise and tides fall  
and this is all just inevitability.

So when you said  
you couldn't take it anymore,  
I didn't think of poetry.  
Rather, I saw you years from now  
in a cheap hotel room lifting the covers  
over your naked body, telling yet another lover,  
"This is the first time  
I've ever done anything like this.  
Please don't think bad of me."  
And how I hoped,  
so hoped, it would be different—  
I would see you in a village  
in Tanzania passing salve and mirth to the poor.  
The mighty Kilimanjaro casting  
the only shadow you have to overcome.  
But it doesn't matter;  
I've done five laps up and back  
and I'm tired.  
At the top of the hill,  
I see the sun glisten off  
the San Francisco Bay,  
the legendary Golden Gate  
rises boldly before me.  
I take a deep breath  
and feel the tightness of my thighs.  
I am in such good shape now—  
a year ago a walk like this  
would have killed me.

Leo Briones

# To Think Of God

We have seen the potter's tale hidden  
in the ashes of dying stars,  
dreamed of snow and sky  
and a land where the great scale pan  
tilts to wash the foul and muck of our stained humanity  
a land where we bear residence  
and have engraved on our foreheads  
the platinum seal of its citizenship.

If the House of Windsor  
is the stiff gilded remainder of lost tribes  
or Netzahualcoyotl the poet warrior  
of the fifth sun, then surely  
there is a flash of memory,  
in our many narratives woven of truth and lies.  
For surely the Son of Man  
shall return on the clouds to mend the broken  
and the Quetzalcoatl God of rainbow and plume  
shall restore dignity to the conquered.

This is to say we have not abandoned  
the musing of the young—hope held  
in our hand like an eager red balloon  
or a perfect telling by the raconteur.  
Here beyond the stammering of fools  
or the brute roar of the powerful,  
there can be heard on the slow  
and definite tick-tock of time's breeze—  
a voice on the rainbow spread of firmament.

A voice soundless  
but for the steadfast tonality of truth—  
we are more than sojourners  
in the fibrous cocoon and embryonic fluid  
of an eternal protest in which there  
is no other space but the space to ask  
like a monk with one second left of faith,  
or a child born in the reappearing stream of auroras—  
our first words indistinguishable from their last—

are we are liberated because we are slaves to truth?  
Are we conquers because we have sown drones to plough shares?  
Are we saved only by the dream of this kingdom, this citizenship come?

Leo Briones

# Unthinkable

On to the gray concrete floor my blood drips  
to tiny mounds of wax that seal packages of death.

In dim brown envelopes, older than fossils,  
locked like a chastity belt of expectation,  
are three pressed purple roses and a faded sepia letter  
written many, many years ago—

the letter tells a fairy tale of a peasant boy denied his princess' love.  
To mourn, he went about the kingdom and distributed  
seven-shiny seeds of justice to the poor.  
The seeds were planted. Then grew to fields of yellow-eyed wheat.

Finally, when the people ate their bread  
and paid tribute their peasant boy—  
they found the valor to storm the castle walls.  
Then on the throne of manifest royalty  
the people placed the king's severed head.  
Yet, when the boy called to her, his princess loved him no more.

Underneath  
the dried roses and the fairy tale  
hide many more wax-sealed envelopes.  
They number nearly one hundred million fold—  
each reveals its own account of the barbarity of love.

Leo Briones

# Weird Weather In Watts

You always said being poor was just  
a different way of looking at things—  
that the white libs and the red necks just never really understood—  
like the first time I asked,  
“Was 65 a riot or a rebellion? ”  
You laughed and said, “Free shopping,  
remember my brother George coming home with all this food.  
First time I ever had that I ate too much feeling.”

Then you gave me that look—  
like you knew I was raised like a spoiled brat—  
but not like you were jealous,  
just sad that everyone was not raised with a hot meal on the table  
and a Mom and Dad who never questioned  
if college and success were in their kid’s future.

So that day when I heard it on the news,

BIZARRE WEATHER CAUSES FLOODS IN SOUTH CENTRAL.

I knew I’d hear from you.

Your first words were,  
“Can’t these idiots get it right, IT’S WATTS.  
South Central is on the other side of the 110.”

You said there was snow and sleet everywhere  
and the streets were flooded like a Venice canal.  
At first I do admit, I thought you were crazy.  
“A relief effort, it can’t be that bad? ” I said.  
You yelled back like Jeremiah chastising  
the Israelites for forgetting their God,

“If it was Beverly Hills everyone would care! ”

See Q, it wasn’t that I didn’t care  
I just couldn’t figure it out

FLOODS IN WATTS

A storm zeros in on one 90002 and 90059  
and barely touches the rest of LA,  
only lasted five minutes at my office on the Eastside.

I really didn't hear what you had done until later  
a friend of a friend at a party told the story this way,

"Yeah, that Quentin Drew is nuts. They say he got all that food  
and all those clothes from some rapper...Big Daddy something...  
and when he was busy passing them out the Congresswoman showed up  
and when she asked him what he was doing in her district,  
he yelled back like the ghost of Malcolm X,  
"I'm doing what you're supposed to be doing! "  
No one ever had the guts to talk to her like that! "

They laughed and speculated what you would become—  
the next great leader or just someone who went crazy for a second,  
crazy with love of his community and his people.

So here we are Q. The dedication of The Quentin Drew Memorial Gym.  
And there are a lot of people here. Dignitaries. Community activists.  
Old ladies from the neighborhood. Your little boy. The folks from Watts Village.  
And I need to tell them how this story ends.

We're sitting in a cold hospital room in Houston.  
The radiation has slapped you so hard you can barely talk.  
So when I look at the picture of you sleeping on all those clothes  
at the gym at Bradley-Milken I'm surprised that you laugh before I do,  
"Didn't believe me, did you, ? " you said  
and I admitted, "No I didn't, " and accused you of being a dramatist,  
an actor always trying to make things more profound for the affect.  
But you would have none of that, just looked at me and nodded your head,  
"Man I had to do that. Those knuckle head gang bangers  
would have stolen all that crap.

See being poor is just a different way of looking at things."

God, how you were always right Q.  
So when I looked down and saw you cry  
for the first time since that oncologist said,  
"It's called Renal Cell Carcinoma and there is no cure."

I started to cry too. I grabbed your hand.  
It was cold and bony and I thought how ironic  
for someone who has always been so warm, so thick with life.

I leaned over and said, "You're gonna be OK, Q."  
You nodded again and then pronounced  
like the wind of time gusting the most important question ever asked,

"I know I'll be good. But, what about my Watts?"

Who's gonna take care of my sacred Watts?  
Who's gonna take care of my sacred Watts?

Leo Briones

# Yellow J

Yellow J

That's all right,  
naughty little journalist  
you ran late to work; missed  
the deadline; lost  
your ballpoint, laptop, and pride.

that's all right,  
you just smile that wire-tied grin,  
need snippers to snap your strain.

that's all right,  
there was a great accident  
beside the strawberry patch;  
no deaths but lots of blood.

that's all right,  
you got your story in; fantastic  
front page coverage, career jump headline!

So now you smirk; fantasizing  
about a Pulitzer and Hearst incorporation

not today but soon.

Leo Briones